



Jan Kowalski

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Introduction

Jan Kowalski was born on 25 December 1871 in Latowicz, Masovian Voivodeship, a town located in east-central Poland, into a relatively wealthy farming family. In 1889, he entered the Metropolitan Seminary in Warsaw and was later sent to Saint Petersburg Roman Catholic Theological Academy. He was ordained a Catholic priest on 24 April 1897 by the auxiliary bishop of Mogilev, Franciszek Albin Symon (1841–1918). In 1900, while serving as a vicar in Warsaw, Kowalski was visited by a friend, Jana Kaczyński (1871–1957), who introduced him to the unofficial supervisor of the Mariavite Priest Order, Kazimierz Przyjemski (1868–1920). The Mariavite Order was a secret religious organisation of Roman Catholic priests and nuns summoned to imitate the life of the mother of Jesus. They placed much emphasis on the Eucharist and devotion to Our Lady of Perpetual Help. Kowalski soon met with Feliksa Maria Franciszka Kozłowska (1862–1921), known as 'Mateczka,' the spiritual mistress and founder of the Order. On 2 August 1893, Mateczka was reported to have experienced revelations of God. The mystic made a great impression on the young priest, who immediately recognised sanctity in her (Kozłowska and Kowalski 1927, 85–91). Even before the meeting with Kozłowska, Kowalski had completed his novitiate, receiving the monastic names Maria Michał. Mateczka had a profound influence on Kowalski's apocalyptic beliefs, which included the idea that early Mariavites lived in the end times. For Kowalski, the end times were not to be understood literally, as in the sense of the end of the physical world, but rather as the age of the ultimate corruption of morality and the fulfilment of the predictions of the book of Revelation. Kowalski also saw his understanding of God's will as preparation for the realisation of the Kingdom of God that would come after the spiritual restoration of humanity and the disappearance of sinners. Kowalski was also instrumental in the elevated interpretations of Kozłowska/Mateczka after her death, including understanding her to be the 'one like a son of man' mentioned in Revelation 1:13, [as discussed here](#).

The Minister General inside the Roman Catholic Church

Kowalski's dedication to the cause and his impeccable monastic lifestyle made him one of the provincial superiors of the Order by the beginning of 1903. In the same year, he headed to Rome with the rest of the Mariavite priests and Mateczka in order to obtain official approval for the Order. While they were on their way, they came to know about the death of Pope Leo XIII (pontificate from 1878–1903), whom they greatly

admired, particularly for his encyclical *Mirae caritatis* in which he called the Eucharist the source of life and encouraged people to receive Holy Communion as often as possible. During Kowalski's celebration of the Mass in a Munich cathedral for the deceased's soul, Mateczka claimed to hear the voice of Jesus, stating that Maria Michał (Kowalski) would become Jesus's vicar on earth (Kozłowska and Kowalski 1927, 172). Days later, on 6 August 1903, when the Mariavites were awaiting the meeting with the newly elected Pope Pius X (pontificate from 1903–1914), Kowalski was chosen to be the first Minister General of the Order. Mariavite efforts to obtain recognition yielded nothing. On 4 September 1904, they were disbanded by the decision of the Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Roman and Universal Inquisition whose members considered Mateczka's revelations to be mere hallucinations. Mariavite priests accepted the decision and the Order ceased to exist. However, they privately kept certain devotions, which was an action not forbidden by the decree. For this reason, they were accused by some Polish bishops of insubordination and were persecuted by fellow priests who regarded their religious practices to be too excessive. At the same time, Kowalski and others were informed by some high officials in Rome (e.g., José de Calasanz Félix Santiago Vives y Tutó [1854–1913]) that the decision regarding the Order might be overturned and they had to be patient. Nevertheless, conflict with the Polish bishops was slowly escalating, and Mariavite priests were either relocated to different parishes or suspended. At the beginning of 1906, seeing no other option available, Mariavite priests formed the Order again, terminated their obedience to the bishops, and sent Kowalski and Roman Maria Jakub Próchniewski (1872–1954) to Rome to inform the Pope personally about the situation in Poland. Before they set off, Mateczka claimed to have heard the voice of God telling her to bestow on Kowalski all authority as he would be guided directly by Jesus. Although the meeting with Pius X gave hope for reconciliation, the conflict in Poland resulted in a negative outcome; a decree issued on 5 December 1906 (but announced in Polish churches on 31 December 1906) excommunicated Mateczka and Kowalski and gave the rest—that is, clergy, sisters, and lay people—twenty days to rethink their decision about remaining. The breach thus became a reality (Pasek 1991, 49). After a while, the Mariavites cast themselves in apocalyptic language as the New Jerusalem which was separated from the two beasts mentioned in Revelation 13. The beasts were interpreted as those willingly persecuting people who were honouring the Blessed Sacrament.

After the Schism

Following the schism, about 50,000–60,000 people decided to follow the Mariavites, who had to organise their own religious life from the bottom up. First, all the churches that they had used so far, even the ones which were built with their private money, were taken from them by secular authorities and given to the Roman Catholic Church. Therefore, the Mariavites had to build their own places of worship again. Their biggest achievement in this regard was the Temple of Mercy and Charity in Płock, designed by Mateczka and Kowalski (Żaglewski 2014, 50). Second, they had to regulate their status with the secular authorities and obtain permission to act legally. Third, they had to protect themselves from their more aggressive religious opponents, who considered the Mariavites to be heretics and betrayers of the Polish interest. On 10 October 1907, the Order's first General Chapter (assembly of monks) after the schism took place. Many significant decisions were made there. Kowalski was officially reappointed Minister General and Próchniewski became his vicar. It was decided that the office of the Minister General would be lifelong, which caused problems in the future. It should be noted that after the schism, the Mariavites operated as the Mariavite Association of Perpetual Adoration of the Supplication, but they did not constitute an independent church. The situation changed in 1909 when the Mariavites united with the Old Catholic

Church (the communion of churches which had separated from the Roman Catholic Church over certain disciplinary issues primarily concerned with papal authority) and when Kowalski was ordained as a bishop on 5 October 1909 in Utrecht. His main consecrator was the Old Catholic archbishop of Utrecht, Gerardus Gul (1847–1920), assisted by a further four bishops. A year later, Kowalski, assisted by two other Dutch Old Catholic bishops, installed Próchniewski and Leon Maria Andrzej Gołębiowski (1867–1933) as Mariavite bishops. As a result, the Mariavite Church created their own independent hierarchy and became self-sufficient as far as further ordination was concerned. It also enabled them to be finally acknowledged as a church by the secular authorities (Podgórski 1998, 39–41). Despite the fact that Kowalski combined the functions of Minister General and bishop, it was Mateczka who maintained the highest authority in the Mariavite Church.

Death of Mateczka and Reforms

The situation changed with the death of Maria Franciszka (Mateczka) on 23 August 1921. Soon after the event, Kowalski assumed the title of archbishop. In the years 1921–1925, he published the Mariavite translation of the Bible, relying mainly, but not exclusively, on the Latin Vulgate and the third edition of the Leopolita Bible published in Kraków in 1577. The process of rendition was long and complex, and Kowalski not only wanted to keep an impeccable literary style but also to explain sufficiently the Mariavite perspective. Therefore, he added many commentaries as well as his lecture on the Apocalypse, which was based on his readings of the book of Revelation through the prism of the works of nineteenth-century Polish Messianists. In 1922, he published *Dzieło Wielkiego Miłosierdzia* [*The Work of Great Mercy*], which contained a biography of Mateczka and all the revelations that were directly written by her. It also included the history of the movement and other theological treatises. Moreover, the archbishop supervised the publication of many Mariavite newspapers, such as *Królestwo Boże na Ziemi* [*The Kingdom of God on Earth*] or *Głos Prawdy* [*The Voice of Truth*]. From 1922 onwards, the archbishop started to introduce reforms in the Mariavite Church that would make the coming of the Kingdom of God and the restoration of humanity possible. Some of these changes proved very controversial for Polish society. For instance, in 1922 he introduced marriages between Mariavite priests and nuns. At first glance, it looks as if they stood in stark opposition to the will of Mateczka, who advised the Mariavite priests to remain celibate. Kowalski, however, thought that such union could only be brought to life after the departure of Maria Franciszka, when she was understood to have perfectly united her will with the will of God. In other words, she mystically married Jesus and gave rise to new unions that would be the foundation of the forthcoming Kingdom (Warchoń 2011, 51). The marriages were to resemble the union between Adam and Eve in Paradise before the Fall. Consequently, they were to be virginal, but not in a strict biological sense. Childbearing within such relationships would be possible only due to the assistance of the Holy Spirit and the will of God (John 1:13). As Kowalski believed that Eve was equal to Adam, he therefore believed that spouses in the newly introduced marriages were equal as well. A natural consequence of such logic was the introduction of the priesthood of women in 1929 (Kowalski and Warchoń 2003, 91–94). Other reforms included, among other things, Holy Communion under both kinds, the abolishment of titles (e.g., “father”), necessary confession before a priest, and the priesthood of people, which was implemented only after the events of 1935.

Consequences of the Reforms

The introduction of marriage for priests and nuns, in conjunction with other, often misunderstood teachings of the Mariavite Church led to allegations of blasphemy and lewd conduct which ended with a judicial process against Archbishop Kowalski. After a long and turbulent trial, Kowalski was sentenced to prison for a year and a half. The sentence, however, was not executed immediately for unknown reasons, though it was most likely because one of the judges declared his vote of dissent and the main accusers withdrew their testimonies (Gołębiowski 2014, 70). Even during the process, Archbishop Kowalski did not stop his pastoral and literary work. In 1932, after the trial, he published his translation of Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*. Some of the Mariavite clergy members slowly came to the conclusion that the persona of the archbishop was not beneficial for the Church and Kowalski should be removed from office. There was a danger that, had he gone to prison, it would have given the secular authorities enough reason to delegitimise the whole of the Mariavite Church. Moreover, they did not necessarily agree with his apocalyptic understandings. They accepted the teaching on end times but grew doubtful about the plan to implement the Kingdom. Therefore, the General Chapter deposed Kowalski from the office of Minister General and replaced him with Bishop Klemens Maria Filip Feldman (1885–1971). The Mariavite Church consequently divided into two entities (Mames 2009, 41). As the schism was accompanied by an atmosphere of scandal and mutual accusations, a third of believers left Mariavitism altogether. Most of the remaining Mariavites sided with the Feldman fraction, which kept the Temple of Mercy and Charity in Płock and adopted the name the Old Catholic Mariavite Church. The smaller fraction remained loyal to the archbishop. He was forced to move with his wife Antonina Maria Izabela Wiłucka-Kowalska (1890–1946) and his followers to Felicjanów, which became the headquarters of the Catholic Mariavite Church. As the majority of clergy supported Feldman and retained access to Mariavite churches, Kowalski introduced a people's priesthood, which was quickly understood as the fulfilment of Mateczka's word spoken in 1918 that the priest would be deprived of authority over people. On 9 July 1936, with the change in office of Minister of Justice, Archbishop Kowalski was arrested and transported to prison in Rawicz on the grounds of the previous court sentence which had not yet been carried out. He left the confinement only on 9 January 1938. While in prison, Kowalski came to the conclusion, following the Fourth Council of the Lateran (1215), that the entire Trinity operates in all salvific moments. He extended this thinking to the Incarnation and wrote that as Mary's body could have been a dwelling for God the Father, the body of Mateczka was inhabited by the Holy Spirit (Warchoń 2006, 119). However, due to the ambivalent meaning of the Polish word *wcielenie*, he could have meant either incarnation or incorporation.

The End of the Archbishop's Life

The archbishop's problems with the secular authorities did not stop after he left prison in Rawicz. On 25 January 1940, he was arrested again, this time by the Gestapo. The reason for this turned out to be articles he had written before the outbreak of the Second World War in which he had argued that the territories of Gdańsk and East Prussia were an integral part of Poland. In another article, he claimed that Stalin, Mussolini, and Hitler were three manifestations of Lucifer. In 1942, he was sent to Dachau concentration camp in Germany. While he was there, Roman Catholic clergy tried unsuccessfully, and not always in a friendly manner, to convert him to their understanding of Christianity. However, until the last moments of his life, Kowalski remained loyal to Mariavitism, to Mateczka, and to the Mariavite teachings regarding end

times, claiming that he would not renounce any of his reforms or understandings which had divine origins. He died on 26 May 1942 at the Nazi Hartheim Euthanasia Centre in Alkoven, Ostmark (Austria). According to Mariavite sources, his death confirmed the words given to Mateczka by Jesus, that the supervisor of the Order would become a martyr (Kozłowska and Kowalski 1927, 119).

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