



Mateczka

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Introduction

Feliksa Magdalena Maria Franciszka Kozłowska (1862–1921), commonly known as 'Mateczka,' was the founder of the Mariavite Church, a monastic movement in the Roman Catholic Church which subsequently became one of the Old Catholic churches, that is, the communion of churches that separated from the Roman Catholic Church over certain doctrines primarily concerned with papal authority. From early childhood, Kozłowska claimed that she communicated regularly with Jesus through internal revelations. She showed devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, receiving communion as often as possible, and to Mary, mother of Jesus. Moreover, she read a lot of religious literature and mortified her body, i.e., by fasting or wearing a cilice (Gołębiowski 2002, 26). In terms of her apocalyptic beliefs and their significance for her followers, perhaps the most significant moment was when she was reported to have experienced a revelation on 2 August 1893 in which she was shown the end times. This does not seem to have been understood as the literal end of the world. For her and other Mariavites, 'end times' stood for the ultimate corruption of morality and fulfilment of the book of Revelation. There was also hope embedded in the vision as God would bestow mercy on those who would honour the Eucharist and seek comfort from Our Lady of Perpetual Help. It was Mateczka who was believed to be divinely appointed to communicate this message to humankind. After her death she became the subject of further apocalyptic speculation. For instance, during her life she was understood to be the woman clothed with the sun from Revelation 12:1 while after her death Archbishop Jan Maria Michał Kowalski (1871–1942) understood her in more elevated terms as 'one like a son of man' from Revelation 1:13. Such speculations were also connected to ideas of an imminent Kingdom of God. In this new epoch, people would, ideally, reflect God's will and renounce bodily lust and so it was claimed that marriages between priests and nuns were acceptable if they imitated the perfect union between Mateczka and Christ.

Kozłowska's Early Years

Kozłowska was born on 27 May 1862 in Wieliczna, Masovian Voivodeship, into the gentry. She soon lost her father, Jakub, who died on 3 February 1863 whilst fighting in the January Uprising, an insurrection in Russia's Kingdom of Poland aimed at the restoration of Polish independence. Later opponents of Mariavites claimed that he was executed by the insurrectionists on the charge of betrayal, which is not corroborated by any evidence. Feliksa, together with her mother, Anna, used the help of their relatives, mostly paternal

step-grandparents, to get through these difficult times. In 1972, they moved to Warsaw where young Kozłowska received her formal education. Earlier, she was tutored privately at home, but after moving, she went to the boarding school for girls run by Countess Skarbek and later to the women's secondary school, number 4 at Miodowa Street. Upon completion of her studies, she knew Russian, French, English, and German at different levels of proficiency. She also knew a little Latin despite the fact it was not a language that was taught at schools for girls. Being well educated, she was hired by General Ulrich as a tutor for his children. It was not what she wanted to do with her life, however. She wished to become a nun, but the difficult political situation in the aftermath of the Uprising hindered these plans. Catholic monastic orders were forbidden by the Russian government from accepting novices.

The Beginning of Kozłowska's Career

When Kozłowska was twenty-one, she participated in religious retreats, after which she joined one of the secret religious orders—the Congregation of the Franciscan Sisters of the Afflicted—organised by Capuchin Honorat Koźmiński (1829–1916), who was later declared blessed by the Roman Catholic Church. The Congregation's purpose was to look after sick people from the upper classes. It was not the right place for Feliksa, who looked for greater contemplation. She was allowed by Koźmiński, who became her spiritual supervisor, to leave and was immediately appointed by him to inspect the network of secret orders. She headed to Płock, where, among her other duties, she took care of sisters who worked in factories. Then, on 8 September 1887, she organised her own Congregation of Sisters of the Poor of Saint Mother Clare (the 'Poor Clares') taking the monastic name Maria Franciszka, which referred to both Mary, mother of Jesus, and Francis of Assisi (Mames 2016, 22). Sisters, however, called her *Mateczka*, a diminutive of 'mother' which was commonly assigned to the Mother Superior in female congregations in nineteenth-century occupied Poland and can be translated as 'Mummy' or 'Beloved Mother.' In order to hide their true identity from the secular authorities, Kozłowska set up a shop where the Poor Clares manufactured religious items for the clergy. Some of the local priests, being aware of the conspiracy, helped the sisters financially and listened to their confessions. These informal nuns were generally admired for their piety and the way they dealt with severe conditions of living.

The Beginning of the Mariavites

On 2 August 1893, when the feast of Our Lady of the Angels (Portiuncula) was celebrated, Maria Franciszka claimed to experience a revelation after hearing a Mass in St. John the Baptist's seminarian church in Płock. She was reportedly called by God to set up a new religious order called the Mariavites—that is, imitators of Mary's life. They would spread 'the Work of Great Mercy,' standing mainly for propagation of the Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and devotion to Our Lady of Perpetual Help (Kozłowska and Kowalski 1927, 5). The vision had clear apocalyptic overtones. *Mateczka* was supposedly informed that they were living in the end times, which was understood to mean the time of the ultimate corruption of morality. The world desperately needed rescuing, which God offered through his mercy if people would turn to certain devotional practices, or through punishment and justice if they would not. The vision did not discuss the literal end of the world but pointed to the coming renewal.

According to the revelation, the Mariavite Order was supposed to consist of secular priests and secret nuns but later also encompassed lay people. Due to the difficult political situation, it initially had to operate secretly. The biggest controversy was caused by the fact that secular priests were to be led spiritually by a woman, who was a nun only unofficially. Not all the clergy who joined in knew about the revelations or Kozłowska. They were called by their colleagues to reform their lives by basing them on the modified Rule of Francis. Some bishops were informed about the initiative in a rudimentary form and informally approved it (Beatrycze and Rafaela 2007, 229). Koźmiński, despite initial hesitation, saw that many graduates of Saint Petersburg Roman Catholic Theological Academy decided to become Mariavites and supported the actions of Maria Franciszka. The Mariavite Order managed to develop successfully for a few years despite the occasional criticism coming from fellow priests.

Schism

In 1903, the Mariavites finally decided to go to Rome in an attempt to gain canonical status. There, they choose their first male Minister General, probably to increase their chances of approval. The choice fell on Jan Maria Michał Kowalski (1871-1942), who represented the Mariavites in their negotiations with the ecclesiastical officials. In 1904, the Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Roman and Universal Inquisition came to the conclusion that Mateczka's visions were hallucinations and delegitimised the movement. The Mariavites tried to appeal that decision, being assured by some influential hierarchs that it could be overturned, but they were excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church in December 1906 (Kozłowska and Kowalski 1927, 216-17).

After the schism the Mariavites did not immediately set themselves up as an independent Catholic church but remained as an independent order for almost three years. They were supported by approximately 60,000 people, who believed that the Pope would change his verdict and bring them back into the Church. This did not happen, however, and the Mariavites became alienated from the rest of Polish society. In 1909, they allied with the Old Catholic churches. The union allowed them to create their own independent hierarchy and to understand themselves as part of the valid Apostolic Succession. Although Kowalski combined the role of the Minister General and bishop, it was Mateczka who remained the highest authority in the Mariavite Church. She continued to claim that she received visions from Jesus until 1918. She was known as a spouse of Christ who was elevated to the highest level of sainthood and in whose hands God's Mercy was placed. In fact, these claims were often, intentionally or otherwise, misunderstood. For instance, already in Christian antiquity, notable Christian theologians [e.g., Origen (184-253 CE)] had argued that individual souls of Christians could become brides of Jesus when they are perfectly united with him, so there were known precedents. When the Mariavites claimed that she was given God's mercy, they meant 'the Work of Great Mercy,' which Kozłowska received through the vision in 1893. Certainly, some Mariavite priests could have exaggerated the role of Mateczka, but she vehemently protested when someone dared to call her holy, which she did not think should be equated with living a humble life (Gołębiowski 2002, 101). The press tried to depict the Mariavites as naive people, indiscriminately devoted to their female spiritual leader. Mateczka was reported to be carried on a special throne during religious services, saying Mass herself, ordaining new priests, and even introducing dogmas. In fact, such reports could not have been further from the truth, which was testified even after investigations by non-Mariavites. Under the Mariavite interpretation, Mateczka was chosen by God but remained a human being and a sinner like the rest of humanity.

Interpretations of Mateczka after Her Death

The death of Maria Franciszka on 23 August 1921 was a huge blow for the Mariavites, but also gave rise to new theological interpretations which were not possible previously. Mateczka was claimed to be perfectly united with Christ at the moment of her departure, thus becoming the spouse of Christ and not merely one of many brides. Her passing was understood in sacrificial terms and she was therefore understood to be cleansed from any traces of sin. Maria Franciszka maintained that she was a great sinner, but this was slowly reinterpreted to mean that she had small imperfections, enlarged to maximum in confrontation with God's perfectness. Such opinions did not emerge in a vacuum but were closely connected to ideas of the impending Kingdom of God. The Mariavites were largely inspired by the writing of the Polish Messianists of the nineteenth century—especially Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855), Juliusz Słowacki (1809–1849), and August Cieszkowski (1814–1894). They were taken as heralds of Mateczka and Mariavitism, just as the Hebrew prophets were understood to be playing the roles of heralds of Jesus and Christianity. These thinkers expected the coming of a new epoch of the Holy Ghost, which was tantamount to the Mariavite Kingdom. This Kingdom was imagined as a place where people would ideally follow God's will and set aside bodily lust. For that reason, Archbishop Kowalski introduced marriages between Mariavite priests and nuns that would imitate the perfect union between Mateczka and Christ (Beatrycze and Rafaela 2013, 252–54). It could easily be imagined that Kowalski broke with the legacy of his spiritual mistress, who wanted Mariavite priests to remain celibate, but he saw it as another step in inaugurating the Kingdom that could not have been introduced before 1921. From this concept grew others, such as ideas about children being conceived without original sin and the ordination of women which emphasised equality between both sexes.

Trying to understand better the identity of Mateczka, Kowalski delved into further studies. First, she was symbolically understood to be a woman clothed with the sun from Revelation 12:1, but around 1929 she became understood as 'one like a son of man' from Revelation 1:13 as the archbishop came to the conclusion that the breasts mentioned in the verse belonged to a female character. In other words, Christians should not have expected the second coming of Jesus, who was perpetually present in the Blessed Sacrament, but his female counterpart. Just like Jesus was the second Adam, Mateczka symbolised the second Eve. The activity of Kowalski led to legal proceedings before the secular court, which put the existence of the Mariavite Church in jeopardy. Kowalski was accused of blasphemous ideas, which at that time in Poland included the open criticism of Papacy. Some members of the Mariavite church decided to remove him from the office, causing an internal split in 1935. After the schism Kowalski came up with the new teaching regarding the Trinity, in which Mateczka was the incarnation of the Holy Spirit (Tempczyk 2011, 99). It was mostly based on the idea that 'spirit' (*ruach*) was understood as a feminine concept in both Hebrew and Aramaic. However, due to the ambiguity of the Polish word '*wcielenie*,' which can be translated as 'incarnation' or 'incorporation,' it is difficult to comprehend the archbishop's idea fully.

Believers who remained loyal to Kowalski constituted the Mariavite Catholic Church in 1935 and believe today that Mateczka was the sinless incarnation of the Holy Ghost. They are, however, few in number, having approximately 2,000 adherents. The second church, known as the Old Catholic Mariavite Church, venerate Mateczka as a saint who was, however, a normal human being with sins. They number over 20,000 members in Poland.

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