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*Jan Maria Michał Kowalski (1871–1942) – Leader of the Mariavite Church in Poland. Outline of the Issues*

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Jan Maria Michał Kowalski (1871–1942) – lider Kościoła mariawitów w Polsce.

Zarys problematyki

ABSTRACT

The article presents the activities of Jan Maria Michał Kowalski and rates his importance as the leader of the Mariavite Church in Poland. Kowalski was the main ideologist of the church and its reformer. He engaged in publishing activities and initiated the publication of Mariavite press. He published his own translations of the Holy Scripture and other religious texts into Polish. He engaged in charitable activities. However, Kowalski's merits were overshadowed by criminal cases, including sexual offences against minors. The introduction contains methodological explanations, a historical outline and a characterization of Mariavitism as an originally Polish confession that began in 1906. The following parts present a biographical outline and activities of Kowalski, his reforms and court trials. It was stated, among others, that Kowalski played the most important role in the development of Mariavitism and he had the greatest influence on the form of the Mariavite press. Kowalski's achievements also consist in increasing the role of the Polish language in liturgy, in religious texts, as well as in his writing and publishing activities. On the other hand, traces of authoritarianism were evident in his actions.

**Keywords:** Mariavites, history of Mariavitism in Poland, Jan Maria Michał Kowalski

INTRODUCTION

The article is a historical study whose aim is to present the activities of Jan Maria Michał Kowalski as the leader of the Mariavite Church in Poland. The most important research on Mariavitism in the field of social sciences and humanities was conducted

by, among others, Artur Górecki, Ryszard Adam Podgórski, Henryk Seweryniak, Edward Warchoł, and Andrzej Kansy [2020]. These are historical research.

Mariavitism is a religious denomination whose origins are rooted in the social and political reality of the Polish lands at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. After the defeat of the January Uprising in 1864, the Russian occupier imposed reprisals in Russian Poland against the Roman Catholic Church for supporting the insurgents. Some religious congregations were dissolved, and church property was confiscated [Ukaz najwyższy o klasztorach... 1864: 5, 9, 19, 23]. The closure of seminaries resulted in a limited supply of priestly personnel. In a situation of high demand for priestly service, this posed a significant challenge. Increasingly, pastoral duties were carried out by elderly priests, often in poor health, leading to neglect and irregularities [Krawczak 1993: 115–116]. This led to conflicts with the faithful.

In these challenging conditions, the Polish Capuchin monk and theologian Honorat Koźmiński began to establish covert secular associations with the aim of meeting the spiritual needs of the faithful. In 1883, Feliksa Kozłowska joined one of these associations. Shortly thereafter, she founded the Congregation of Poor Sisters of St. Mother Clare in Płock, adopting the religious name Maria Franciszka.

The origins of Mariavitism as a renewal movement within the Roman Catholic Church and later as a distinct religious denomination are linked to the revelations of Christ experienced by Kozłowska. The first of these revelations occurred in 1893 during prayer. The content of the revelations was associated with entrusting Kozłowska with the mission of moral renewal of the clergy through the practice of various forms of Marian devotion. One of these forms was the establishment of the Congregation of Mariavite Priests [Górecki 2011: 373]. It was founded by Roman Catholic priests who took on the task of renewing religious life in Russian Poland. Upon joining the Congregation, all priests adopted, in addition to their religious name, the name Maria to emphasize the special role of the Virgin Mary [Podgórski 1998: 22–23]. One of the priests was Jan Kowalski.

The Mariavites attempted to seek approval for their movement from the Vatican, but these efforts ended in failure. As a result, in 1906, Kozłowska and Kowalski were excommunicated by the Pope. In this situation, the leaders of the movement founded the Union of Mariavites for Perpetual Adoration and Supplication, bringing together all followers, and appealed to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia for permission to operate [Seweryniak 2014: 71, 386]. As a result, in 1906, the Council of Ministers of the Russian Empire adopted a regulation guaranteeing the Mariavites the legality of their actions and legal distinctiveness [O wydaniu tymczasowych przepisów... 1906: 3971–3972]. Further regulations were included in the Law on Mariavite Parishes of 1909, which addressed the principles of creating parish statutes [Sawicki 1935: 230–231; Ministerstwo Wyznań Religijnych i Oświecenia Publicznego. Sekty... signature 1431: 40–46].

An important factor in the development of the Mariavite Church was its acceptance into the Utrecht Union, which united various Old-Catholic churches. At that

time, the name was changed to the Old Catholic Mariavite Church. The association with the Utrecht Union enabled the acquisition of apostolic succession through the consecration of Kowalski as a bishop in 1909. This, in turn, authorized him to consecrate new priests [Rybak 2011: 67–69].

In 1910, Tsar Nicholas II recognized Kowalski as the head of the Mariavite Church and granted him the right to represent the Church before the state [Grelewski 1935: 95–96]. Significant legal regulations were established in the Law on the Mariavite Faith adopted in 1912 by the State Council and the State Duma of the Russian Empire [Skwara 1925: 9–12]. The favorable stance of the Russian authorities towards Mariavitism can be interpreted as an attempt to weaken Catholicism and facilitate the expansion of Orthodoxy in Russian Poland [Ministerstwo Wyznań Religijnych..., signature 376: 8–9].

After Poland regained independence in 1918, the legal situation of the Mariavites was unclear. They could only operate in the former Russian Poland under the old law [Russian State Historical Archive... 1905–1917. Fond 1276: 96]. It was not possible in the former Prussian and Austrian Poland due to the absence of legal acts concerning the Old-Catholic Mariavite Church. The legal recognition of the Church by the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Public Enlightenment occurred only in 1930.

In 1935, a schism occurred, leading to the formation of two Mariavite denominations: the Catholic Mariavite Church, led by Kowalski, and the Old-Catholic Mariavite Church with Bishop Filip Feldman at its helm. During World War II, Mariavites in both religious communities suffered significant losses. Many priests, nuns, editors, and authors of Mariavite publications were arrested. After the end of World War II, Mariavite churches did not regain their former membership levels. In their peak year of 1912, there were approximately 180,000 followers [Górecki 2011: 214]. Currently, the Mariavite community consists of two denominations. The first, the Old-Catholic Mariavite Church in the Republic of Poland based in Płock, has 22,700 faithful, while the second, the Catholic Mariavite Church in the Republic of Poland based in Felicjanów, has 1,800 followers [*Rocznik Statystyczny Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej...* 2022: 198].

Mariavitism is part of the Old Catholic denominations. It is based on the principles of faith and morality presented in the Old and New Testaments, as well as on the dogmas established at the first seven ecumenical councils and the revelations of M.F. Kozłowska. Mariavites of both denominations do not recognize the primacy of bishops and do not acknowledge the infallibility of any human, including the pope, in matters of faith and morality. Followers of both Mariavite churches recognize the seven Catholic sacraments. In the Old-Catholic Mariavite Church, baptism is administered in infancy, while confirmation occurs in adolescence. Holy Communion is given in the form of bread and wine. In the Catholic Mariavite Church, baptism, confirmation, and first Holy Communion are received in a single ceremony. Penitence among Mariavites can take the form of general confession before Jesus or individual confession before a priest. Mariavite clergy are allowed to get married and establish families. In the Catholic Mariavite Church, women can hold priestly functions.

## JAN MARIA MICHAŁ KOWALSKI (1871–1942)

Jan Maria Michał Kowalski had the greatest influence on the development of Mariavitism. He was born on December 25, 1871, into a farming family in the village of Latowicz in Mazovia [65-*ta rocznica...* 1937: 6; Ginter 2006: 36]. He studied at the Theological Seminary in Warsaw and later at the Theological Academy in St. Petersburg. After receiving priestly ordination in 1897 in Warsaw, he worked in Roman Catholic parishes in Łódź, Warsaw, Niesułków, and Stara Sobótka. In 1900, he became associated with the Mariavite movement and joined the secret Assembly of Mariavite Priests, taking the religious name Maria Michał. He soon became the Minister General of the Assembly of Mariavite Priests and the leader of the Mariavite Union of Perpetual Adoration and Supplication [Rybak 2011: 66–67]. He led the Mariavite Church from 1910 to 1935. After the schism, he founded the Catholic Mariavite Church and served as its leader from 1935 to 1940.

In response to the outbreak of World War II, Archbishop Kowalski sent a letter to Adolf Hitler expressing opposition to the annexation of Gdańsk and demanding the restoration of his authority over all Mariavites. He also proposed to Hitler a conversion to Mariavitism. Kowalski published critical remarks about Hitler in the magazine “Królestwo Boże na Ziemi” (“The Kingdom of God on Earth”) and emphasized the Polish identity of Pomerelia, demanding its return. Kowalski’s actions led to his arrest in 1940 and deportation to the Dachau concentration camp in Germany, and later to Hartheim near Linz (Austria), where he perished in a gas chamber in 1942, and his body was cremated [*Lista ujawnionych osób...*].

According to Bishop Jakub Próchniewski, Archbishop Kowalski

provoked his own deportation to Dachau. Specifically, he wrote a letter directly to Hitler, demanding the removal of supporters of the reform of the Mariavite Church from the Monastery in Płock, the return of the Monastery in Płock to Kowalski and his followers; he emphasized [...] as the prophet of God, that if Hitler did not comply with this demand, he would lose the war against France and England. The result of this letter was that Hitler ordered the arrest of Archbishop Kowalski in Felicjanów, imprisoned him in Płock, and investigated who he was. The investigations ended sadly: his moral abuses came to light, and the unfortunate Kowalski was deported to Dachau, where he ended his life after a severe penance. [Urząd Wojewódzki w Płocku... signature 1995: 21]

After his death, Archbishop Kowalski was recognized as a saint by the Catholic Mariavite Church [*Encyklopedia katolicka* 2002: 1087–1088].

## REFORMS

After Kozłowska's death in 1921, Kowalski appointed himself archbishop and soon began implementing radical reforms in the church [Warchoń 1997: 43–70]. He declared masses performed for money invalid, leading to the Utrecht Union suspending relations with the Old-Catholic Mariavite Church. Additionally, he introduced the possibility of clergy entering into marriage and allowed marriages between priests and nuns. Another idea implemented was lay priesthood, allowing lay believers to perform priestly duties and administer all sacraments. A novelty was also the equalization of the rights of men and women in priesthood, enabling the ordination of nun sisters as priests and even as bishops [Podgórski 1998: 50]. Kowalski married the nun Antonina Maria Izabela Wiłucka and soon ordained her as archpriestess. He initiated the replacement of clergy titles with terms such as “priest”, “brother”, and “sister”. He allowed the celebration of the Holy Mass outside consecrated places. One of the major reforms was the introduction of the cult of Kozłowska as Mother.

Kowalski's reforms were not well-received by Mariavite priests and followers. Due to dissatisfaction, an internal conflict and schism occurred in 1935, dividing the Mariavite Church into two communities. Removed from power, Archbishop Kowalski settled in the estate of Felicjanów near Płock. This marked the beginning of the split in the Mariavite Church into two denominations – the Płock denomination, represented by the Old-Catholic Mariavite Church, and the Felicjanów denomination, the Catholic Mariavite Church.

## LAWSUITS

There were controversial aspects in Kowalski's life, as he was accused of sexual crimes against nun sisters and wards, leading to a conviction with a final judgment. As a result of the accusations, a highly publicized trial took place in 1928, lasting until 1931 [Akta Sędziego Śledczego na powiat płocki..., signature 1658]. The trial was a sensation nationwide, with over a hundred journalists present in the courtroom of the Płock court. Both national and international media covered the event. The trial concluded with Kowalski being sentenced to 3 years of imprisonment. He served the sentence in the Rawicz prison from 1936 to 1938. His release from prison was reported by the Polish Telegraphic Agency in the press, indicating significant public interest in the case.

After the announcement of the Appellate Court's verdict, the Security Department of the Warsaw Provincial Office conducted reconnaissance. They informed the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Public Enlightenment about the sombre mood among Mariavites. There were rumours that witnesses testifying against Kowalski had been bribed. There were also mentions of a special envoy from the Holy See personally appealing to the Minister of Justice for the approval of the verdict by

the Appellate Court. Reports indicated that during sermons, Archbishop Kowalski reassured the faithful, likening himself to Christ, who was also judged. Prayers for the extension of the condemned archbishop were held in the Mariavite monastery in Płock. Meanwhile, the Roman Catholic community welcomed the verdict, hoping for the elimination of the “Mariavite sect by the authorities”.

It was also reported that Archbishop Kowalski was considering traveling to Czechoslovakia allegedly for therapeutic purposes [Ministerstwo Wyznań Religijnych i Oświecenia Publicznego. Sekty... signature 1431]. In 1931, following a re-examination of the case by the Appellate Court, upon the Supreme Court’s request, a sentence of three years in prison was handed down, which was later reduced to two years through an amnesty law [Podgórski 1998: 58].

### CONCLUSIONS

Jan Maria Michał Kowalski played the most important role in the development of Mariavitism. He was a well-educated priest capable of implementing bold visions, engaging in writing and publishing activities. He published over 40 pastoral letters, elucidating Mariavitism principles to the faithful. Kowalski undertook a 20-year effort to translate the Holy Scripture into Polish, covering the Psalms of David and the Proverbs of Solomon. Additionally, he authored and published significant works for Mariavitism, including “Lecture on the Apocalypse”, outlining the main foundations of Mariavitism, and “The Work of Great Mercy”, presenting Kozłowska’s revelations.

He published numerous brochures constituting the theoretical basis of the confession, such as “What is Mariavitism”, “The Issue of Mariavitism”, “The Main Principles of Faith and the System of the Mariavite Church”, “Correspondence between Bishops and Roman Catholics Regarding Reconciliation”, “On the Real Presence of the Lord Jesus in Holy Communion”, “Justification of the Pastoral Letter on Confession Before Christ”, “The Error of the Papacy”, “Life of St. John Chrysostom”, “Biblical Catechism”, “Short Mariavite Catechism”, and prayer books. Kowalski’s literary interests led to translating Mikhail Lermontov’s poem *Demon* and parts I and II of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* into Polish. Inspired by these works, he composed the poem *Beatrice*.

Archbishop Kowalski had the greatest influence on the form of the Mariavite press. He provided the impetus for its initiation and determined the publishing line of individual magazines [Kansy 2022: 113–121]. In the initial period of Mariavitism, the most important tasks for the magazines were to establish and maintain contact with community members and provide them with knowledge about Mariavitism. Clarifying various issues resulting from the creation of the new religion was extremely important to exclude the feeling of confusion among the followers and to confirm them in the rightness of their choice. Kowalski carried out these tasks initially in the magazine “Mariawita. Czciiciel Przenajświętszego Sakramentu” (“Mariavita. Devotee of the Blessed Sacrament”) and then in other publications.

From the very beginning, social issues were important to Kowalski, which he raised in the supplement “Wiadomości Mariawickie” (“Mariavite News”) he initiated and edited. In this magazine, Kowalski realized the need to improve education among Mariavites, the vast majority of whom came from educationally neglected working and peasant communities [Akta Mariawickiej Gminy Wyznaniowej w Łodzi..., signature 39/282/2]. Kowalski saw the need to form Mariavites religiously, morally, and civically, which is why the Church’s publishing offer was adapted to different age groups.

In addition to titles for adults, children’s magazines were published: “Dziecko Mateczki” (“Mother’s Child”) and “Drużyna Mateczki” (“Mother’s Team”) “Templariusz” (“Templar”) and “Templariuszka” (“Templar”) were addressed to young people. Kowalski used the Mariavite press to convey the ideas of the Kingdom of God on earth and national messianism. Moreover, the published magazines served as a platform from which he announced the reforms he was introducing.

The published press titles were also, for Kowalski, a medium for responding to attacks in newspapers directed against the Mariavites and a tool for defense during court trials of Mariavite priests and Kowalski himself.

Evaluating the activities of Archbishop Kowalski is not easy due to the controversies he aroused. On the one hand, he was a charismatic religious leader with a bold vision; on the other hand, traces of authoritarianism were evident in his actions. Kowalski’s merits also increasing the role of the Polish language in liturgy and religious texts, as well as his writing and publishing activities. He was also involved in charitable activities, including establishing schools, kindergartens, homes for orphans, shelters for the elderly, as well as free institutions for mothers in difficult situations. However, matters of a moral and criminal nature, especially the sexual abuse of minors, cast a shadow over the entire activity of the archbishop.

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JAN MARIA MICHAŁ KOWALSKI (1871–1942) – LIDER KOŚCIOŁA MARIAWITÓW  
W POLSCE. ZARYS PROBLEMATYKI

**Abstrakt:** W artykule przedstawiono działalność Jana Marii Michała Kowalskiego i dokonano oceny jego znaczenia jako przywódcy kościoła mariawitów w Polsce. Kowalski był głównym ideologiem kościoła i jego reformatorem. Zajmował się działalnością wydawniczą, zainicjował wydawanie prasy mariawickiej. Wydawał własne tłumaczenia na język polski Pisma Świętego oraz innych tekstów religijnych. Prowadził działalność dobroczynną. Zasługi Kowalskiego zostały przysłonięte przez sprawy kryminalne, między innymi przestępstwa seksualne wobec osób nieletnich. We wstępie zawarto wyjaśnienia metodyczne oraz zarys historyczny mariawityzmu jako oryginalnie polskiego wyznania, którego początek datuje się na 1906 r. W kolejnych częściach przedstawiono zarys biograficzny i działalność Kowalskiego, jego reformy oraz procesy sądowe. Stwierdzono m.in., że Kowalski odegrał najistotniejszą rolę w rozwoju mariawityzmu i miał największy wpływ na kształt prasy mariawickiej. Zasługi Kowalskiego polegają także na zwiększeniu roli języka polskiego w liturgii, w tekstach religijnych oraz w jego działalności pisarskiej i wydawniczej. Z drugiej strony w jego działaniach zaznaczył się autorytaryzm.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Mariawici, historia mariawityzmu w Polsce, Jan Maria Michał Kowalski



## BIOGRAPHY

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