

The Mariavite Order

By far, one of the most important early 19th century events in the development of the Old Catholic Movement has been the Mariavite Order in Poland. The nucleus of this movement was a community of nuns, founded in 1893 and organized under the Rule of Saint Francis for the promotion of asceticism and the moral purification of the Polish Church. These nuns were teachers in the parochial schools of Poland and greatly influenced the lives of the clergy and laity in whatever part of the nation they ministered. An order of priests, observing the Franciscan rule was added to them and in 1909 there were 68 priests and a large number of students ready for ordination.

These two communities were solemnly bound by an understanding that their work was to begin with a moral regeneration amongst their own kind within the Church -- the clergy and religious orders. From the first they were actively opposed by the Polish Jesuits and at last an order came from Rome that they were to be dissolved. When they refused to break up their community life, they were formally condemned in April 1906, and in December 1906, all their members and adherents cut off from the rites of the Roman Church.

A period of bitter persecution set in, but somehow they managed to keep together and increase their numbers. The Polish peasants were stirred up against the "Mariaviten" and their woman leader, "The Little Mother," to such a degree that armed attacks were made against the followers when they gathered together in religious meetings. The Roman authorities at one time circulated a report that the Sacrament consecrated by the Mariavite priests became not the Body of Christ, but an Incarnation of the Devil, and in consequence terrible sacrileges were committed against Mariavites and several of their churches were burned to the ground.

With the growth of its numbers and in increasing necessity of Episcopal supervision for its parishes the Order at last decided to ask the Old Catholics to consecrate a bishop for them. Accordingly the bishop-elect Brother Jan Michael Kowalski and two of his brethren were sent to the international Old Catholic Congress in Vienna in 1909. Through the great Russian theologian, General Alexander Kireef, they were introduced to the delegates of the Congress. There, on the last morning of the meeting, Brother Kowalski stated the ground of his appeal and asked the prayers and sympathy of the assemblage. The Mariavite priests with their bare sandal feet and gray habits formed a striking and arresting impression in the midst of the other delegates and their genuine and simple character won them many new friends. After careful consultation the Old Catholic Bishops accepted their application and the first bishop of the Church in Poland, Brother-Bishop Jan Michael Kowalski, was consecrated at Utrecht, Holland, early in October of that year.

For the next several years, the Old Catholic Church in Poland had steadily increased. In February and March of 1909 the Minister of the Interior of the Polish government gave the Mariavite order official state recognition. Within the parishes, Churches, parsonages, schools, and other institutions were rapidly built. In the parish of Lodz in 1910, where there were already 40,000 Mariavites, four handsome Churches were built entirely through the efforts, personal and manual, of the clergy and laity.

Driven by the boycott of their Roman Catholic neighbors to depend more and more upon their own efforts, the members of the Mariavite movement soon developed a civil as well as a religious form of community amongst themselves. They worked and traded with each other, supporting one another, creating their own industries and soon, by cooperation, they rendered themselves entirely independent. Cooperation stores in villages and lodging houses in towns were organized. Hospitals staffed by their own doctors and nurses, orphanages, schools, homes for the aged, soup kitchens, milk dispensaries, fire departments, cultural activities, farms of magnificent acreage, factories -- in fact all the necessary prerequisites of

modern living -- were developed and organized within their own groups and used to serve their neighbors.

Though this social and industrial reorganization greatly improved the position of the Old Catholics in Poland, it had to be accompanied by great personal sacrifices. In one town, Leszno, where cooperative factories on a large scale -- for bookbinding, shoemaking, cabinet making, and similar activities -- had been organized, several families handed over all their property to the community and put their own services unreservedly at its disposal.

Underlying the power and vitality of this movement which led to wholly new social groupings and industrial experiments was the ever present guidance of a strong and inspired leader -- a woman, Mary Francis Felicia, devotedly acknowledged by all as "Mateszka." Simple and unassuming in manner she nonetheless provoked a religio-social movement worth the consideration of the world's serious minds. She proved to be, in the fullest sense, the "little mother" of her people.

The *Mariavite Movement was, up to that time, significantly different from any similar religious manifestation. It is in effect the working out of a practical application to life of the social significance of the Gospel. The foundress of the movement, the Little Mother, Mary Francis Felicia, believed and taught that the Kingdom of God on Earth is to be understood as a divinely human society -- a society in which justice, brotherhood, equality and the general welfare of all its members prevailed. Basically, the Little Mother established her theory on the formula that for God's Kingdom to come on earth His will must also be done.

The Mariavites believe that the curing of all social ills rests in properly relating the human element to the spiritual regeneration of family, nation and society. But since ethical theories and social realignments in themselves are not enough, they maintain that the "direct action of God" working on the human spirit is essential. "The direct action of God," they say, "is fulfilled in the partaking of Holy Communion, which, in the opinion of the Mariavites, must be the 'daily bread' of men and women." In this sense the entire religious and social life of the Mariavites centers upon the Holy Eucharist at which the faithful communicate as a means of daily regenerating the human spirit and as the first step toward the regeneration of society and the realization of the Kingdom of God on earth.

Christianity, according to the Mariavites, is to be lived. Worship enters into every field of human activity. Its end and sole purpose cannot be found in religious gatherings held at stated periods alone. The act of worship, the liturgy, is an active and motivating experience in the lives of all who take part in it. During World War II more than 350,000 followers in Poland demonstrated the possibility of this life of faith and work even under the trying exigencies of world conflict.

Oddly enough, women play the important part in this religious movement. It was first founded by a woman who also directed its social possibilities. The administration of major communities of the movement in many parts of the country was in the hands of women. The work of the sisters had been of such beneficial influence that they have been asked by the populace of many sections to administer parochial activities. Of the total number of about 1571 religious workers, including clergy, brothers of the Order and the sisterhood, more than one thousand of them are women actually engaged in the administration of the movement. The General Chapter which meets to elect new officers and to decide the general administrative policy of the movement has an equal representation of women with votes. The Mother General of the Sisters must take part in the election of a new Archbishop as well as in all proceedings of the General Chapter.

The religious workers of the Movement were grouped into three categories. First there were the priests and members of the brotherhood who lived under the Rule of Saint Francis. The community of nuns, about 600 in number, compose another group to which were added about 400 deaconesses under the supervision of the Mother General. Under the third grouping some 500 [persons following a modified religious rule, gave their

time and energies to the movement. Of this last number a great many consist of married couples voluntarily devoting their lives to buttress the work of the clergy and the sisterhood. Joy is a paramount requisite of a Christian life and the Mariavites everywhere radiate a warm and becoming mirth.

The zeal of the Movement touched the peasant populations of central Europe and awakened a living religious movement amongst them. A Pole writing of the effect this movement has on the people says, "From the surrounding neighborhood of their habitations there would be a flood of thirsty souls eager for God and His mercy." People when they met the Mariavites turned to God with such a subsequent change in their mode of life that even the Jews were wont to say, "What kind of new Christians are these."

The Old Catholic Church under the administration of the Mariavite Order in Poland was in every way a distinct and important demonstration of the possibility of a 20th century Christian social order. From Poland their influence spread to other parts of the world where in some places it became well established. Mariavite missions were founded in Lithuania, France, England, South and North America.

Mariavites supported themselves with the labor of their own hands and offered their ministrations freely to all without salaries, mission funds are not a necessary consideration of the movement., The Church, they would say, is here to give every assistance to people both for their spiritual and material well-being; it does not have to take from them. Perhaps it might yet be said of the Mariavites everywhere in the world, as it was then said of them in Poland, "Wherever there is a Mariavite there is neither hunger nor sorrow."