

CATHOLICISM, ETHNO-CATHOLICS, AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN MODERN POLAND

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Executive Summary

In trying to define “Catholicism,” I distinguish between three interlocking phenomena: Catholicism, ethno-Catholics, and the Catholic Church (or the doctrine, the community, and the institution). None of these is coterminous with the others, yet they can never be entirely disentangled. Talking about the relationship between them can be extraordinarily difficult. I propose to do so by focusing on two sites of analysis: the doctrinal core of Catholicism (as specified in canonical and authoritative texts), and the moments of controversy or heresy that push the boundaries of the faith. This allows us to see Catholicism as a space for debate and diversity rather than a list of static features, without dissolving the faith into amorphous heterogeneity. To exemplify this approach, I look at the Mariavite controversy in early 20th century Poland, which both challenged and helped specify matters of ecclesiology that in turn clarified some of the limits of Catholicism’s conceptual framework.

What Does It Mean to be “Catholic”?

What do we mean when we say “Catholic”? What is implied by the claim that “95% of all Poles are Roman Catholics”? When historians try to understand how Catholicism has shaped modern Polish culture and society, what exactly are they studying? Defining Catholicism might seem to be relatively simple, given the highly centralized nature of the Roman Catholic Church.

At first glance, this would appear to be an institution with clear lines of authority, a well-articulated set of dogmatic claims, and easily specified conditions of membership. It might be difficult to define generic secular ideologies like liberalism or socialism, and it might be tricky to determine exactly who belongs to decentralized religious communities like Judaism or Hinduism, but would not Catholicism be the one great “ism” that *can* be readily delineated?

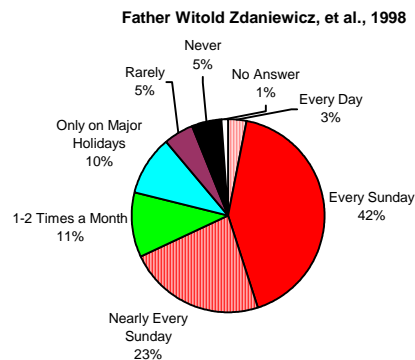
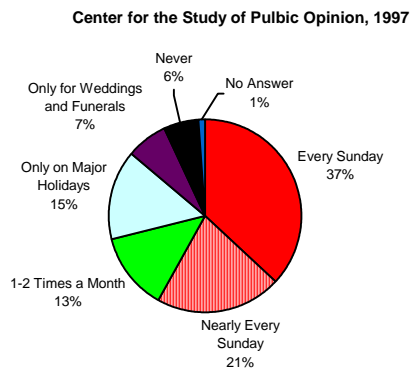
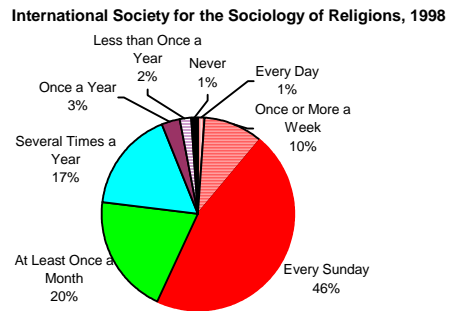
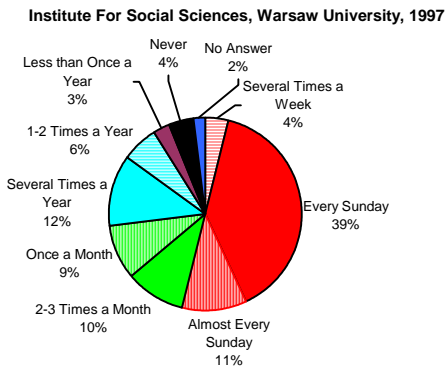
Unfortunately, no: in practice the adjective “Catholic” turns out to be just as indeterminate, vague, and open-ended as any other label of identity, ideology, or faith. Almost any definition we posit will exclude some who use this label for self-identification, or become so broad as to include those whom most Catholics would consider to be outside the flock.

It might seem reasonable to take self-identification as a starting point, and accept that if someone says she is Catholic, then she is. Using that measure, there are a staggering 1,043,000,000 Catholics in the world today, making it the largest religious community on earth (with Sunni Muslims following close behind at 900,000,000).¹ More to the point for the purposes of this paper, the self-identification standard makes Poland appear almost homogeneous: depending on how one formulates the question, between 90% and 98% of the population will answer “Roman Catholic” when asked about their religion.²

¹ http://www.adherents.com/adh_rb.html (accessed July 7, 2004).

² Irena Borowik and Tadeusz Doktór, *Pluralizm religijny i moralny w Polsce: Raport z badań* (Kraków: Nomos, 2001), 23.

But such unanimity is always problematic, inevitably concealing and containing heterogeneity. Indeed, when dealing with numbers like these, it becomes hard to consistently link religious affiliation with actual religious practice, let alone religious belief. Four major surveys from the late 1990s tried to pin down how often people in Poland went to Mass, and though each posed the question differently, the general pattern was clear.³

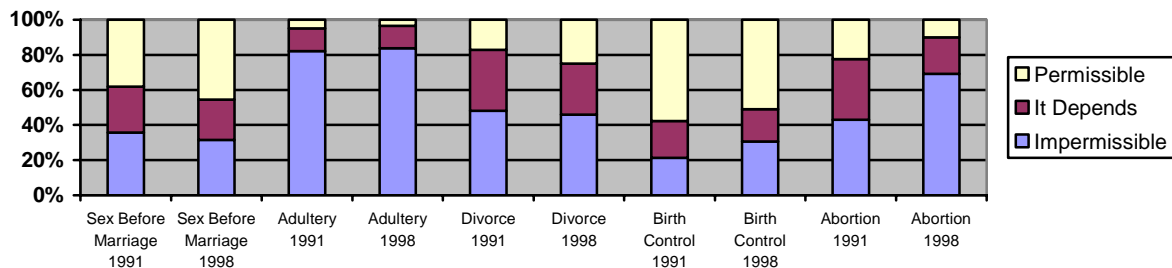


³ The ISSR survey is covered in Borowik and Doktor, 135. The remaining studies are cited by Janusz Mariański, „Niedzielne i Wielkanocne praktyki religijne,” in Witold Zdaniewicz, ed., *Religijność Polaków 1991-1998* (Warsaw: Instytut Wydawniczy PAX, 2001), 86-88.

All these figures are all based on self-reporting, and a number of studies have shown that people tend to vastly overstate their level of observance. In Poland, a Church-sponsored study revealed a gap between reported and actual attendance of 10-15%, and a similar project in the US (including both Protestants and Catholics) suggested an even greater disparity.⁴

Even the most skeptical observer will have to acknowledge that Poland is a *very* religious place, with one of the highest rates of religious participation in the industrialized world, but the fact remains that in a country where more than 90% of the populations claims to be Catholic, *far* fewer actually go to Mass with any regularity. My point is not to downplay the religiosity of the Poles, but only to make the obvious point that even in Poland, a large number of people are able to claim a Catholic identity without demonstrating much Catholic religious practice.

The gap between identity and religiosity is even greater if we look to the realm of personal behavior. Calling oneself a Catholic, even in Poland, does not mean that one will necessarily follow the moral teachings mandated by Rome. A survey repeated in 1991 and 1998 indicated the following views on matters of sexual morality in Poland:⁵



⁴ C. Kirk Hadaway and P.L. Marler, “Did You Really Go To Church This Week? Behind the Poll Data,” *The Christian Century* (May 6, 1998): 472-475; Zbigniew Nosowski, „Czy Polska jest (jeszcze) krajem katolickim?” *Więź* 5 (2003).

⁵ Ks. Witold Zdaniewicz, „Zachowania religijno-moralne,” in Zdaniewicz, 73.

The dramatic decline in support for abortion suggested here is not backed up by other polling data. A large international survey comparing attitudes in 10 European countries suggested that the Poles, while less likely to approve of abortion than their fellow Europeans, were very far from Rome on this issue: between 70-80% of Poles surveyed thought abortion was acceptable to save the life or health of the mother, to prevent the birth of a severely handicapped child, or in cases of rape or incest. 35% thought the poverty of the mother could justify an abortion, and 20% thought it was enough that the mother simply did not want to have the child.⁶

So that leaves us with only one major question of sexual morality – adultery – on which even half of the Poles accept the injunctions of their Church. When we think about the relationship between religious identity and religious doctrine historically, we encounter even greater difficulties. Pervasive illiteracy, inconsistently educated priests, rural isolation, the enduring strength of pre-Christian folk customs – all this needs to be factored into our picture of Catholicism in each particular historical context. We might be able to say that self-identification as a Catholic increases the likelihood that a person would or will engage in certain ritual practices or believe certain things, but one by no means follows necessarily from the other.

It is tempting, faced with this dilemma, to avoid speaking about Catholicism as an ascriptive term of theological affiliation, and to shift to microcosmic studies of religiosity in well-defined and narrowly-bounded contexts. Indeed, the move towards microhistory that has so enriched our discipline over the past two decades has helped us all understand that neither the grand terms of social science (nation, class, race, gender, etc.) nor the sweeping labels of political philosophy (liberalism, socialism, nationalism, fascism, etc.) ever correlate precisely to the lived experiences of concrete individuals.

⁶ Tadeusz Doktor, „Moralne konsekwencje religijności—Polska na tle innych krajów,” in Burowik and Doktor, 317.

In the field of religious history, the best works of recent years have focused on the quotidian practice of religion or the irresolvable dialogic tensions between spiritual authorities and rank-and-file believers. Reacting against older scholarship which had blithely conflated the claims of the clerical elite with the collective convictions of “the Church,” social historians and anthropologists of the 1980s and 1990s insisted (rightly) that there was no necessary correspondence between priest and parishioner, between the teachings of the official catechism and the actual beliefs of the faithful. What some have called “the new religious history” justly prioritized the autonomy of the believer and elevated religious practice over abstract statements of faith.⁷

Nonetheless, dogmatic claims remain relevant, even if they are not definitive. No matter how sensitive we are to complexity and diversity, we are left with the fact that people do speak about Catholicism *as if* it were a single, coherent belief system, *as if* claiming a Catholic identity implied the acceptance of a set of Catholic teachings. People all over the world act as if there were a bounded phenomenon called “Catholicism” with identifiable beliefs and practices, so we scholars are obliged to consider the possibility that on some level there is. Many Catholics take

⁷ This has become a very rich field of study, and it is difficult to single out just a few exemplary texts. Among the most influential have been David Blackbourn, *Marpingen: Apparitions of the Virgin Mary in a Nineteenth-Century German Village* (New York: Random House, 1995); William A. Christian, Jr., *Person and God in a Spanish Valley*, new revised edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); Jean and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Suzanne Desan, *Reclaiming the Sacred: Lay Religion and Popular Politics in Revolutionary France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); Robert Greene and Valerie Kivelson, eds., *Orthodox Russia: Belief and Practice Under the Tsars* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003); Dagmar Herzog, *Intimacy and Exclusion: Religious Politics in Pre-Revolutionary Baden* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); , Daryl Hart and Harry S. Stout, eds., *New Directions in American Religious History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Thomas Kselman, *Death and the Afterlife in Nineteenth-Century France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Thomas Kselman, ed., *Belief in History: Innovative Approaches to European and American Religion* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991); Mary Peckham Magray, *The Transforming Power of the Nuns: Women, Religion, and Cultural Change in Ireland, 1750-1900* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Jonathan Sperber, *Popular Catholicism in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Princeton University Press, 1984); Peter van der Veer, *Conversion to Modernities: The Globalization of Christianity* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Philip R. VanderMeer and Robert P. Swierenga, eds., *Belief and Behavior: Essays in the New Religious History* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1991).

debates over what it means to be a Catholic very seriously, so we have to give some attention to whatever it is they are debating about. For all the richness of microhistorical studies of religious practice, *something* continues to exist on the macrocosmic scale, and we historians need to figure out how to talk about it.

Boundaries of Catholic Doctrine and Belief

What theological beliefs, moral precepts, and religious practices can be attributed to Catholicism in a general sense? How can we bridge the gap between the evident heterogeneity of the Catholic community, and the widespread sense that there nonetheless exists a coherent entity called Catholicism? In practice, I think scholars have dodged this problem by implicitly (and less often explicitly) defining Catholicism differently for different sorts of research projects. Sometimes the term “Catholic” refers to the institutions of the Church and the official hierarchy, as when we speak about the Catholic response to the Holocaust (a debate focusing mainly on Pope Pius XII).

At other times “Catholic” refers to a cultural community, as when we refer to the struggles between Protestants and Catholics in Ireland. A useful term here might be “ethno-Catholic”: someone for whom religion is a Durkheimian means of solidifying community and subjective belonging. Finally, we have *Catholicism*: the theological doctrines and the social, moral, and political teachings articulated by the clergy, sustained and defended by the institutions of the Church, discussed in Catholic press, taught to the faithful through devotional

texts and catechism classes, and preached in sermons. So we are really dealing with three concepts: the Catholic Church, ethno-Catholicism, and the Catholic faith (in other words, the institution, the faithful, and the belief system).⁸

Not every ethno-Catholic knows or even cares what *Catholicism* teaches. For some (perhaps most), the theological and ideological teachings of the Church are distant memories from childhood Sunday School, and the sermons at Mass are things to be endured or ignored. For such Catholics, their religion is a locus of community, a source of identity, and maybe a forum for rites of passage at birth, maturation, marriage, and death.⁹ These are the people who can, without any sense of self-contradiction, use birth control, deny papal infallibility, even question the existence of God without weakening their identity as Catholics.

A recurrent theme in Catholic homiletic writing over the past century has been the concern that too many of the supposed faithful are ethno-Catholics in this sense. As Archbishop Józef Bilczewski put it in a pastoral letter from 1901, “We must not simply call ourselves Catholics, but be Catholics....We must be Catholics at home and outside of home, every day and every hour, with (so to speak) every inch of our being.”¹⁰ Almost a century later, Father Mieczysław Nowak would complain that “for a large percentage of the Poles, faith is only a stereotypical mindset, a tradition, an extremely superficial declaration.”¹¹ Between these two

⁸ For a similar three-pronged approach to the study of religion, see Jonathan Sheehan, “Enlightenment, Religion, and the Enigma of Secularization,” *The American Historical Review* 108, 4 (October 2003): 1061-1080.

⁹ For all the inconsistencies in Poland surrounding religious participation and adherence to Church teachings, 99% of all children are baptized and 93% of all marriages are consecrated with a church wedding. See Borowik and Doktor, 23, 127.

¹⁰ Józef Bilczewski, “List pasterski do wiernych archidiecezyji w dniu konsekracji i intronizacji – 20 stycznia, w dniu N. Imienia Jezus 1901,” *Listy pasterskie i mowy okolicznościowe* (Mikołów-Warszawa: Nakładem Księgarni Karola Miarki, 1908), 30.

¹¹ As cited by M. Ł. “Pytania o wiarę,” *Rzeczpospolita* (January 17, 1998), http://www.rzeczpospolita.pl/Pl-iso/dodatki/plus_minus_980117/plus_minus_a_2.html (accessed January 17, 1998).

citations are hundreds – indeed, thousands – of sermons echoing the same concern. For those who claim to truly care about Catholicism, the ethno-Catholics in their parishes have been an ongoing source of displeasure.

St. Thomas Aquinas articulated what has become a classical precept of Christianity: “The worship of God has two parts: the first – external bodily worship – is at the service of the second—an interior worship uniting our minds and hearts to God.”¹² The interiority of which Aquinas spoke is beyond the grasp of historians – depending on one’s point of view, it belongs either in the realm of the psychologist or that of the theologian. That said, what we might call the collective interiority of the Catholic Church – the dogmas, doctrines, ideologies, and worldviews that constitute Catholicism – *can* be described and studied. It is possible to sketch a picture of Catholicism even as we recognize that Catholics are an irreducibly diverse group encompassing everything from learned theologians to casual ethno-Catholics.

To use a slogan that was once very popular in Catholic writing, there are moments when the Church feels compelled to proclaim “*non possumus*,” to stand before some ideas and say “no further.” Beyond the relatively small handful of such lines, however, there are many relatively fluid and contested positions that can change from time to time and place to place, yet stay within the broader framework of Catholicism. The scholar’s task is to locate the lines that define this framework, and explore how some ideas can circulate with them, while others get pushed outside.

If Catholicism is narrower and more specific than the multitude of beliefs articulated over time and space by millions of ethno-Catholics, it is nonetheless broader than the corpus of pronouncements by those with official positions in the hierarchy of the institutional Church.

¹² St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: A Concise Translation*, edited by Timothy McDermott (Allen, Texas: Christian Classics, 1989), 300.

Any approach that separates the producers of doctrine from those who receive (or resist) such teachings – that posits the clergy and the laity as entirely distinct – fails to acknowledge the extent to which Catholic thought is generated at multiple sites.

I am proposing that we bring doctrine back into our discussion of Catholic history, but not by merely shifting attention from popular rites and rituals to pastoral letters and theological tracts. Instead, I propose to simultaneously recognize and problematize normative claims about Catholicism: to focus on the attempt to draw boundaries around what it means to be Catholic, while at the same time highlighting the fact that such attempts are always contested, and never fully successful. In other words, I suggest that we approach Catholicism neither as a stable doctrinal whole, nor as an indeterminate cluster of distinct faith communities; rather, we should look at Catholicism as a bounded site of contested meaning, finite but malleable, heterogeneous but not infinitely so.

More specifically, I believe that we can best study Catholicism by looking at two intertwined sites: 1) the normative center of Catholicism—the beliefs and practices preached by the hierarchical authorities of the Church and the canonical texts of the faith; and 2) the acts of controversy or (in extreme cases) heresy, when people do or say things that challenge the aforementioned boundaries. Whether a person merely generates debate or is formally excommunicated, such envelope-pushing brings into relief that which is at the very edge of the thing called “Catholicism.”

Those unfamiliar with the Catholic tradition are often surprised by the amount of diversity that is possible within the Church. The principle of papal infallibility would seem to suggest that the Pope’s particular interpretation of any given issue should be irrefutable, and that a plurality of opinions on any matter would be hard to sustain. However, the doctrine of

infallibility only applies to very specific sorts of statements made under special circumstances. In fact, it has only been formally invoked once: in 1950 when Pius XII proclaimed the doctrine of the Assumption of Mary. Just because an official position on nearly every question exists does not mean that dissent is impermissible. Not every “ought” is a “must,” and not every “must” implies the same degree of obligation. Catholicism is best thought of as a shifting, but always delineated, discursive space, within which a finite but nonetheless significant variety of positions are possible.

The focus of scholarly analysis, I would thus propose, should be the limits of this diversity, the edges of that discursive space, the contested territories that segregate the Catholic from the nonbeliever. By giving significant attention to debates and dissention, I suggest that we can describe Catholicism without turning it into an abstraction or an ideal type. Catholicism is not a doctrinal constant that exists above and beyond the Catholics who live within it, nor is it a theological mish-mash of the ideas articulated by millions of ethno-Catholics. Rather, it is a discursive field that is constantly being created, sustained, and re-created by those who participate in it. Even though Catholicism is not coterminous with the population of people who call themselves Catholics, it is nonetheless a conceptual vocabulary that exists only insofar as it is spoken, a mental framework that is defined by those who think within it. Studying the boundaries of this “ism” will not generate a one-sentence definition, and the resulting picture will mutate over time, but it will allow us to make positive claims about Catholicism.

To illustrate how such a methodological approach might work, let us take one moment of religious crisis and controversy in Poland and explore how it exemplified and defined the doctrinal boundaries of Catholicism. For a variety of reasons that need not concern us here, the first years of the 20th century were a period of unusual turmoil in the Catholic Church. Faced

with the combined challenges of social, political, cultural, and economic change, many Catholics began to search for new forms of religiosity to suit the modern world. In doing so, some of them pushed (and thus revealed) the boundaries of what one could do while remaining within the Catholic fold.

Certainly the most dramatic challenge to the existing models of Catholicism in Poland at the time came from the “Mariavite” movement, a group of Catholics who were committed to an emotional and intensely personal religious revival rooted in an eclectic mix of traditional devotional practices.¹³ The movement was founded by a visionary nun named Felicja Kozłowska (1862–1921), after she received a revelation instructing her to combat “the universal corruption of the world” as well as “the laxity of morals among the clergy and the sins committed by priests.”¹⁴ She stressed a personal relationship with the divine, expressed through frequent attendance at mass and participation in the Eucharist, through the use of devotional medallions to focus prayer, and through the Catholic rite of the adoration of the host. She also believed that faith should be evident in the daily lives of the believers, and so she demanded personal rectitude and expected priests to serve as models in this regard. Her criticism of the clergy was sometimes severe, as she charged both rank-and-file priests and (most importantly) the hierarchy of the Church with moral turpitude and inadequate spiritual leadership. This, she felt, justified the formation of a new religious order for both laymen and priests, dedicated to the spiritual renewal of the Church. She called her order the “Mariavites” (*Mariawici*, from *Maria vita*).

Kozłowska, accompanied by 17 priests from her movement, met with the newly elevated Pope Pius X on August 13, 1903, in order to plead for official recognition. This seemed like an inept move (because in going directly to Rome she had bypassed and snubbed the Polish

¹³ Robert E. Blobaum, *Rewolucja: Russian Poland, 1904-1907* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 247-49; Jerzy Peterkiewicz, *The Third Adam* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975).

¹⁴ As quoted in Peterkiewicz, 10.

hierarchy), but she did so deliberately, convinced that her bishops were unworthy. In any case, she did not get what she wanted: she met the Pope at a public reception for only a few brief moments, long enough to receive a pro-forma blessing, and soon afterwards Pius issued a formal repudiation of her efforts. Most Mariavite priests were transferred to isolated rural areas, and in early 1906 those who remained recalcitrant were suspended from the clergy.

In April of that year the Pope issued the encyclical *Tribus circiter* condemning the Mariavites, followed by the excommunication of all those who refused to renounce their mistakes and repent. The Mariavites, in return, acknowledged that they had severed their ties with Rome, and petitioned the Russian authorities for recognition as an autonomous religious organization (the Russians, delighted at this split among the Catholics, promptly agreed). Over the next few years the Mariavite movement grew rapidly among both laymen and the lower clergy in the Russian partition of Poland, with almost 59,000 members in 1907, 83,000 in 1909, and 156,400 in 1910. Missionary Polish priests from the Austrian partition of Poland were even sent to the Russian partition to re-convert those who had deviated from the mainstream Church, and within individual communities there were sometimes violent fights over control of local church buildings.¹⁵ Nonetheless, the Mariavites never quite developed the critical mass needed to form a genuine alternative to Roman Catholicism, and by the start of WWI the movement had faded away, disappearing as quickly as it had emerged.¹⁶

What does this story tell us about the boundaries of Catholicism? At what point did Kozłowska step beyond the lines of the possible, and imagine things that were supposed to be unimaginable within a Catholic framework? The story seems puzzling at first glance, because

¹⁵ O. Czesław Bogdalski, ed., *Wspomnienia z misji odprawianych od 1906-1908 roku w Królestwie Polskiem, zabranych prowincjach i Cesarstwie Rosyjskiem przez braci mniejszych św. Franciszka prowincyi galicyjskiej* (Kraków: Nakładem Zakonu Braci Mniejszych, 1908).

¹⁶ But not entirely: to this day tiny clusters of Mariavites remain active in Poland, and they have a website: <http://www.mariawita.pl>.

even Pope Pius X recognized that most of what the Mariavites were doing was unimpeachable. They promoted moral purity and rigor, frequent participation in the sacrament of Communion, and a number of traditional and entirely acceptable devotional practices. The problem came in how Sister Kozłowska and her followers justified this religious revival. As the Pope put it,

Relying on an alleged mandate from God, they set themselves to promote without discrimination and of their own initiative among the people frequent exercises of piety (highly commendable when rightly carried out), especially the adoration of the Most Holy Sacrament and the practice of frequent communion; but at the same time they made the gravest charges against all priests and bishops who ventured to express any doubt about the sanctity and divine election of [Kozłowska], or showed any hostility to the society of the Mariavites.¹⁷

This was not just a conflict between Sister Kozłowska and Pius X, not just a case of the hierarchy slapping down a disobedient nun. There were many denunciations of the Mariavites from within Poland itself, and not all of these can be attributed to a threatened bishop. Some, perhaps, can indeed be dismissed as expressions of episcopal anger. For example, a statement issued by a special 1908 diocesan synod in Przemyśl declared that “the Mariavites have not as yet formulated a profession of their faith; one may say, however, that their main error is to negate hierarchical authority and the primacy of the Holy Father.”¹⁸ It seemed that the Mariavites were not being condemned for what they believed, but for their refusal to acknowledge the institutions of the Church.

Within this terse statement, however, was in fact a very important statement about Catholic religious belief, and ultimately about the meaning of Catholicism in a broad sense. This becomes clearer if we look at the reaction of a Capuchin friar named Honorat Koźmiński to the Mariavite crisis. For several decades prior to this controversy, Koźmiński had been

¹⁷ Pius X, *Tribus Circiter* (5 April 1906).

¹⁸ „Dodatek to Paragraphus 13, caput II, Titulus I z statutów Synodu przemyskiego z r. 1902.”, *Akta i Statuta Kongregacji Synodalnej* (Przemyśl: Ordynaryat Przemyski, 1908), 37.

spearheading the creation of a variety of female religious orders. This was a small part of two much wider European phenomena: the massive growth in women's orders throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and the expansion of Catholic institutions beyond the existing parish structures. Koźmiński, following in the footsteps of similar organizers all over Europe, wanted more people to make a formal commitment to a religious life. The members of these lay orders pledged themselves to live a more structured Catholic lifestyle: they subordinated themselves to strict rules mandating exceptional moral purity and establishing specific cycles of prayers to be offered on a regular basis. In 1883 the young Kozłowska joined one of these orders, then in 1887 (again under the sponsorship of Father Koźmiński) she created her own local chapter of the Society of the Poor Sisters of St. Clara. This was the foundation from which she launched the Mariavite movement.

In 1906 Koźmiński published a small book denying that his organizational efforts had anything to do with the Mariavites, despite some of the superficial similarities between his network and this new sect. Initially Koźmiński did indeed greet Sister Kozłowska's project with approval, though he had worried that her devotional fervor could be generating a few minor doctrinal errors. But with time it became evident to Koźmiński that such little mistakes had grown into "Satanic delusions."

The key problem with the Mariavite movement – the sin that made Koźmiński realize what a danger they posed – was their renunciation of ecclesiastical discipline. "Their first mistake was disobedience," he wrote, "which demonstrated that they were not seeking God with modesty, but were blinded by pride." At first he had been willing to accept that Sister Kozłowska had received a revelation – the history of Catholicism was filled with such events –

but she demonstrated that her vision did not originate from God when it led her to defy the Church. “After all,” Koźmiński argued, “it is known that obedience is considered in the Church to be the only marker of unusual divine phenomenon.”¹⁹

The Mariavites had succumbed to a familiar heresy in Koźmiński’s eyes: “the rebellious priests taught in a heretical manner that those bishops and priests who did not live in accordance with what they considered appropriate rules for a chaplain, lost the power to govern them. Only small-minded people could think up something like that, or believe it, because what would happen if spiritual power were tied to virtue? There would be no certainty for the faithful.”²⁰

A cynic would find this whole episode easy to interpret: the Mariavites were being slapped down for challenging their superiors. It was a simple case of authority vs. resistance, power vs. the subaltern. Yes, it was this – but within the context of Catholicism such a revolt will always have an additional layer of meaning. For the devout, the Church is more than a human institution: it is the Kingdom of God on Earth. Ecclesiology plays a definitive role in Catholic theology, and to really get a sense of this we need to pull back from the specific concerns of 1906 and the Mariavite controversy, and look at some of the repeated themes in Catholic writing and preaching from the past couple centuries – some of the arguments that have transcended contextual specificity.

Father Piotr Semeneńko, one of the most prominent Polish Catholic preachers of the 19th century, once said that the essence of Catholicism could be summarized in three words: “*Bóg, Chrystus, i Kościół*” [God, Christ, and the Church].²¹ An 1845 article in the journal *Pielgrzym*

¹⁹ Honorat Koźmiński, *Prawda o ‘Maryawitach,’* (Warszawa, Fr. Czerwiński, 1906), 13.

²⁰ Koźmiński, 22.

²¹ X. Piotr Semenko, *O miłości ojczyzny. Nauka druga, miana w Rzymie w Poniedziałek Wielkanocny (dnia 24 Marca 1864)* (Poznań: N. Kamieński i Spółka, 1864), 10.

itemized four basic ideas from which all of Catholic doctrine emanated: the immortality of the soul, the fall of man, the salvation of man, and

*The legitimate [prawowierny] apostolic Christian Church, visible on earth in the form of its organic spiritual hierarchy and [the Pope]. From the hands of the Church, the Christian world receives legitimate teachings, the norms of Christian life, and the rules for religious rituals. From [the Church's] hands [the world] receives the grace and blessings necessary for eternal happiness and even for worldly success. The Church...is the only true deputy of Christ...Whoever does not recognize the Church as his mother with a feeling of willing obedience, cannot (as St. Cyran put it) have God as his Father.*²²

In the most widely used Polish catechism of the late 19th century, Father Józef Krukowski summed up the essence of Catholicism in less subtle terms: “How should we briefly proclaim our faith? With these words: I believe and proclaim everything that the holy Roman Catholic Church believes and proclaims.”²³

Distinctions That Define Catholicism

Most of what Catholicism has to say about God and Christ would be familiar to any Christian, but Catholic ecclesiology is somewhat distinctive. “The Church,” as defined by the Vatican, is not just the institution headquartered in Rome, not just the community of the clergy, not certainly just the population of self-identified ethno-Catholics. The term “Church” is flexible, and in a broad lexicographical sense can be defined sociologically, anthropologically, politically, institutionally, or demographically, but Catholic thought (and Catholic politics) makes little sense if we restrict ourselves to any of these mundane approaches. Stefan Cardinal Wyszyński of Poland put it this way in 1958:

²² J. K. S., „Synteza,” *Pielgrzym* (luty 1845), 120.

²³ Ks. Józef Krukowski, *Nauki katechizmowe na całość prawd wiary św. katolickiej*, 3rd edition (Kraków: Gebethner i spółki, 1880), 141.

We must fully understand that the Church is not just a human, secular, natural organization; it is not some sort of exclusively earthly force; it is not a political or economic organization. Of course, the Church possesses social aspects, corresponding to the demands of earthly life, and although it has a redeeming influence on earthly affairs, nonetheless our life in the Church depends on drawing supernatural power from Christ and on contributing to the growth of the supernatural, Mystical Body of the Church.²⁴

This was a message regularly heard in sermons over the past century (and probably longer). A homily delivered in the fall of 1966 by Father Rajmund Koperski of Warsaw reminded the faithful that

Most commonly, when we observe the Church from the exterior, what emerges is its external side – that which is human, visible, subject to evaluation, and that which can serve as material for historical, sociological, or legal scholarship. Limiting oneself to this level of observation will give incomplete results. A picture of the Church based on such research is like a frame without a picture, a book cover without its contents. The Church is not just a human institution, but above all a Divine institution. From this come the difficulties in observing it, in this lies the source of that which we call the mystery of the Church.²⁵

The Church – whatever else it is – is endowed (for believing Catholics) with a holiness stemming from its sacred origins. It is not a mere social community or hierarchical institution. It has long been a source of frustration among devout Catholics that secular observers are unable to discuss the Church on its own terms. In words that could have been repeated at almost any moment during the past century, the Jesuit publicist Jan Rostworowski charged liberals in 1906 with a fundamental misunderstanding of the Church. Proponents of liberal modernity, he wrote, were dedicated to “the elimination at all costs the very memory of the transcendent and the otherworldly.” This, he argued, was something a true Catholic could never accept. Even the

²⁴ Stefan Wyszyński, „Wezwanie do pracy wielkopostnej w duchu Ślubowań Jasnogórskich” (Gniezno-Warszawa, Wielki Post 1958 r.), in *Listy pasterskie Prymasa Polski, 1946-1974* (Paris, Éditions Du Dialogue, 1975), 300.

²⁵ O. Rajmund Koperski (Warszawa), “Jaki Kościół założył Chrystus? (na uroczystość Objawienia Pańskiego),” *Biblioteka Kaznodziejska* 77, 5 (listopad 1966): 265.

liberal who claimed to be Catholic, he wrote, “does not know how to look upon the Church and everything that is in the Church from a sufficiently *supernatural* point of view.... All his attention is absorbed by things earthly and human, and thus the necessarily imperfect side of God’s creation....Catholicism is a religion that is from top to bottom quintessentially supernatural....So everything that is in the Church has only one goal, one task, one reason for existence: to instill, preserve, and perfect supernatural life in the human soul.”²⁶

In 1910, Father Franciszek Walczyński summarized Catholic ecclesiology in a homiletic guidebook written for parish priests:

The Kingdom of Christ, which is the Catholic Church, encompasses the entire world and counts about 400 million subjects on this earth, and in heaven a countless host of heavenly souls and the Lord’s Saints. That Kingdom of Christ has already lasted twenty centuries despite horrible tumult and persecution, and it will last for the ages, here on earth as the Church militant until the end of the world, and in heaven as the Church triumphant for centuries.²⁷

As suggested in this passage, theologically the Church is defined as the “Kingdom of God on Earth,” and only by unpacking the ramifications of *that* loaded phrase can we start to understand Catholicism. A sermon by Father P. Gerntke from 1920 affirmed that “The Kingdom of Christ is not of this world, but has a supernatural character.” Nonetheless, that did not mean that mortals were not part of this Kingdom, because “here on earth the Catholic Church is the image of the Kingdom of God, and in it as King and Master Christ will rule until the end of

²⁶ Jan Rostworowski, *Liberalny katolicyzm* (Kraków: W. L. Anczyc i Spółka, 1906), 48, 49, 50-51.

²⁷ Ks. Franciszek Walczyński, *Podręcznik do kazań i nauk o Matce Bożej* (Tarnów: Księgarnia i Drukarnia Zygmunta Jelenia, 1910), 15. This work bore an imprimatur from Bishop Leon Wałęga.

time.” In this sense, “The Kingdom of Christ encompasses all of humanity, from the beginning until the end of its history.”²⁸

One of the most important doctrinal claims of Catholicism is the idea that the mundane Kingdom of God already exists, in the form of the Church itself. The theological use of the term “Kingdom” is important for any Christian, because the word appears repeatedly in the New Testament. But the Greek word *basileia* (to this day the official catechism of the Church cites the Greek as authoritative) is more ambiguous than the English “Kingdom,” implying not only the territorial locus or physical manifestation of authority, but also the authority itself. So the *basileia* discussed in the Bible could also be translated as “the rule of God” or “the reign of God,” giving the phrase a different sense.

As the Church’s most recent official catechism (from 1992) puts it: “‘To carry out the will of the Father, Christ inaugurated the Kingdom of heaven on earth.’ Now the Father’s will is ‘to raise up men to share in his own divine life.’ He does this by gathering men around his Son Jesus Christ. This gathering is the Church, ‘on earth the seed and beginning of that Kingdom.’”

²⁹ The phrase “Kingdom of God” does not imply, in this presentation, a perfected state of social existence on earth, nor does it refer to the reign of God in heaven. Instead, it describes the community of all those who have embraced the teachings of Jesus and subordinated themselves to the rule of God. Through Christ’s death and resurrection, the catechism teaches, He already

²⁸ X. P. Gerntke, „O królestwie Chrystusowem (na niedzielę V Postu),” *Nowa Biblioteka Kaznodziejska* 27, 4 (marzec 1920): 181-182.

²⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraphs 541-542, 763. A convenient version of the catechism is available on-line, at <http://www.christusrex.org/www1/CDHN/ccc.html> (accessed July 9, 2004). The printed version was published by Doubleday in 1995. The internal quotations in this passage are from *Lumen gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution of the Church, as proclaimed by Pope Paul VI on November 21, 1964.

“accomplished the coming of his Kingdom.” It exists now, as something Christ himself created by coming to earth, and it exists in the hereafter, much as the Father and the Son are one, even though Jesus resided temporarily on earth.

To support this view, Catholic theologians will often cite the Book of Luke: “Once, on being asked by the Pharisees when the reign of God would come, [Jesus] replied: ‘You cannot tell by careful watching when the reign of God will come. Neither is it a matter of reporting that it is “here” or “there.” The reign of God is already in your midst.’”³⁰ St. Augustine is another popular source, for he argued that the blessings of the Kingdom of God “begin in this life, of course; they are increased in us as we make progress, but in their perfection—which is to be hoped for in the other life—they will be possessed forever!”³¹

The Catholic image of the Kingdom of God, then, has two sides. It is already here, insofar as the Church already exists and the message of Christ has been transmitted to mankind, but it cannot be “perfected”—it cannot come to its final realization—until we reach “the other life.” In 1843 a Polish Catholic periodical put it this way

The Church is the representation of Christ, it is the person of the living Christ in humanity, which is to carry out and fulfill [*wykonać i wypełnić*] the redemption of the human race. In all parts of the whole, and likewise in the destiny of the whole, the Church is therefore on the one hand a creation of Christ, the fruit of his death on the cross, and on the other hand it *is* Christ living in humanity for the expansion of His Kingdom over all men... Since the word became flesh and lived among us, so also must the Church, which is the that word dwelling within humanity, be embodied and visible.³²

This is why the teachings of the Church are said to be sacred, and why its traditions are every bit as inviolable for orthodox Catholics as the writings of Scripture. The declaration of papal infallibility in 1870 was not novel in the broad sense, because the Church had long stressed

³⁰ Luke 17:20-21

³¹ St. Augustine, *Handbook on Faith, Hope, and Love*, trans. Albert C. Outler (Christian Classics Ethereal Library CD Rom, 1998), chapter 30, paragraph 115.

³² Jan Janiszewski, „Znaczenie i ważność mszy świętej,” *Pielgrzym* (listopad 1843), 162-63.

that its dogmatic definitions were not subject to error. Pius IX was only innovative insofar as he elevated the solitary role of the popes above the body of the bishops, ending a longstanding tension between the papacy and a centuries-old conciliar movement.

The Church, in Catholic theology, is much more than just an institution: it is the already-present reign of God on earth, showing mankind the way to the heavenly Kingdom. As one Catholic publicist put it in 1868, “the theory teaching that a person can be a Christian even without submitting to the Church, or even while fighting against it, is probably a *Jewish* theory, because it excludes Christ from human life.”³³ Comments like this were not necessarily (at least, not only) antisemitic; they reflected a deeply held belief that the Church was the depository for revelation—the only possible depository. Thus, to deny the Church was to deny Christ.

The Church’s struggle to retain its authority in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries cannot be interpreted *only* as the defense of a specific interest group or political hierarchy: for believers, the Church itself was the very embodiment of Catholic doctrine, its most integral element. The theological foundation of Catholicism and its struggle for political survival in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were alternative manifestations of the same thing.

Here, then, we find the great sin of the Mariavites – the element of their movement that pushed beyond the boundaries of Roman Catholicism. Not much that they specifically *did* was wrong from Rome’s perspective, but the fact that they based their activities on a personal revelation to Sister Kozłowska, and (worse) that this revelation included a mandate to challenge the established lines of authority within the Church – this is what brought down the wrath of Rome. In protecting those lines of authority, the Vatican and the Polish bishops were of course

³³ *Kościół i Postępowość* (Poznań, M. Leitgeber, 1868), 8. Emphasis in the original.

defending their power and their interests just as any secular potentate would, and it is possible to analyze all this without any references to Catholic theology. But there was so much more to the story.

First, it would be a gross oversimplification to reduce the Mariavite controversy to a dispute between the hierarchy and a group of subalterns. Father Koźmiński – a Capuchin monk far from any corridors of power – was just one example of the many who reacted with anger towards the Mariavites not because he had any temporal interests at stake, but because he considered her to be a heretic and a threat to his faith. On the local level, there were emotional and sometimes violent conflicts between parishioners; fighting in the town of Leszno in 1906 left 27 injured and six dead, while in the city of Łódź there were five fatalities. There were similar, but less deadly clashes in many towns across Poland.³⁴

It is hard to say precisely what led to such violence, but obviously something more than just the personal authority of the bishops was at stake. In any case, whether these conflicts were taking place on the local level or between the Episcopate and Sister Kozłowska, the vocabulary that people could draw upon to describe (and thus think about) their discord was provided by Catholicism. As they worked through their disagreements within this framework, they refined and clarified its shape and its limits. In this case, the particular limit in question involved the nature and meaning of the Church and its institutions.

In the grand scheme of things the Mariavite controversy was a minor affair. Only one year after Kozłowska's excommunication, the Church would become embroiled in the so-called "modernist crisis," which led to multiple encyclicals of condemnation, pushed a number of famous Catholic scholars and priests outside of the Church, and generated an atmosphere of witch-hunts and paranoia that would cripple Catholicism for decades to come.

³⁴ Peterkiewicz, 35.

Nonetheless, in its own small way the debates (and literally the fights) over Mariavitism brought into sharp relief doctrinal questions that went to the heart of what Catholicism was all about. By bringing these matters to the forefront, an important element of the faith was debated and defended, and found to constitute one of those *non possumus* moments that both identified and in a sense established the boundary around Catholicism as it existed at the start of the 20th century. Thus is Catholicism defined: not with a stable or static set of precepts, but neither as a doctrinally empty or indeterminate cluster of localized and contingent cultural practices.