



The Theological Foundations of Matylda Getter's (1870–1968) Humanitarian Activities in the Face of Life-Threatening Situations

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Abstract: The article aims to present the theological foundations of the life and activities of Mother Matylda Getter, a Franciscan sister of the Family of Mary, superior of the Warsaw province, engaged throughout her life in the care, upbringing, and education of abandoned children and orphans, and then cooperating particularly sacrificially during the German occupation in saving endangered Jewish children. The authors of the article posed the question of the reasons for the unusual attitude of Mother Getter, who, as a distinguished long-term superior of a religious province, was not required to take such risky actions during the war. The following analysis shows that this was possible because of a deep commitment to a personal relationship with the Master of Nazareth and openness to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, as well as the long-standing cooperation of many people adhering to a shared spirituality and monastic rule.

Keywords: Matylda Getter, Franciscan Sisters of the Family of Mary, Jews, the rescue of Jewish children, Second World War, the German occupation of Polish lands

Admiration for heroes is a timeless and cross-cultural phenomenon. Even if, with time, the system of cultivated attitudes and values undergoes changes, the need to notice outstanding figures, who show the horizon of human possibilities, sometimes lighting up the light in even the deepest darkness of events and human doubt, does not disappear in any culture. The selection of recognized heroes usually reflects currently preferred values and hidden longings; it influences the imagination and goals of the next generation.

There are heroic attitudes, aroused by the urgency of the moment and the dramatic nature of the event; the manner of immediate action demonstrates the heroism of the person responding at the risk of his or her life. However, long-term situations beyond the day of test require not only a strong impulse of heart and will, but also numerous competences, which are achieved through the development of virtues, so valued in many cultures, regardless of the preferred value systems. Deeper reflection on the lives of prominent figures reveals the non-accidental nature of their choices and actions; one can recognize the time of their maturation, and the acquisition of competences that enable them to perform extraordinary deeds. The mere possession

of these skills does not necessarily entail a decision to use them, especially in a risky situation. The question remains open as to what drives some individuals to take long-term actions far beyond their duties or responsibilities in the face of threats to their own lives and the lives of their loved ones.

An example of such a figure is Mother Matylda Aleksandra Getter (1870–1968),¹ Franciscan of the Family of Mary, an outstanding and brave person (Frącek 1978, 72–73; see 1994; 2018a; see Waluś 2013, 68–71; Zechenter 2019),² undertaking throughout her life under very difficult social and political conditions tasks beyond the expectations and demands of her surroundings.

The skills, competence, and virtues acquired earlier over the years enabled Mother Matylda Getter to work effectively and energetically on behalf of children, adolescents, and adults in extremely difficult conditions. For 81 years Mother Matylda Getter committed her strength and health to the Congregation of the Franciscan Family of Mary, strongly influencing the development of the community through her work in positions of responsibility; she was a teacher and educator, but also the superior of monastic homes in Odesa, St. Petersburg, Warsaw, then the Warsaw Province. She gained widespread recognition for her educational and organizational work before 1939. During the Second World War, she saved, among others, over 750 Jews, including more than 500 children. The figure of Mother Matylda Getter can be aptly described in the words of Pope Francis: “Worthy of special consideration and honour are those Christians who, following more than closely the footsteps and teachings of the Lord Jesus, have voluntarily and freely offered their lives for others and persevered with this determination unto death.” (Francis 2017; cf. Francis 2018) Despite her constant exposure to danger, the leader of the Franciscan Sisters of the Family of Mary survived the war, even though she risked her life every day in the name of Christ saving people in danger during the German occupation. One can speak of her “free and voluntary offer of life and heroic acceptance *propter caritatem* of a certain and untimely death;” (Francis 2017; cf. Francis 2018), because she saved people, as she herself pointed out, in the name of Christ, risking her own life and that of her fellow nuns, who agreed every day for several years to practice the virtues to a heroic degree, aware of the threat of death or suffering and of slowly dying in a concentration camp, according to the laws of the German occupation (Frącek 1983, 5).

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2 She was a nun of the Congregation of the Franciscan Sisters of the Family of Mary, a teacher, educator, superior of monastic homes in Odesa, St. Petersburg, Warsaw, and the Warsaw Province, organizer of 25 educational and caring institutions, meritorious in the field of education and charity, awarded the Order of Polonia Restituta (1925), the Golden Cross of Merit (1931), the Golden Cross of Merit with Swords during the Warsaw Uprising (September 27, 1944), and posthumously with the medal “Righteous Among the Nations” (1985).

Mother Matylda Getter would not have accomplished many of these deeds had it not been for the solidarity-faithful assistance of the Franciscan Sisters of the Family of Mary, who risked their own lives every day to save those in danger, usually completely unknown to themselves beforehand. The attention of researchers is drawn to their faith in Divine Providence, their mutual loyalty and solidarity in risk-taking, their sense of identity as a Franciscan community across all divisions, and to their strong, carefully developed Christian arethology, enabling the Provincial Superior to act efficiently as the leader of a community of several hundred women (Frącek 2018a, 38).³

In examining her life and activities, questions can be posed to define the research problem. Was it action arising from duty or from a life united to Christ, which in effect seeks fulfillment in love?⁴ How did Mother Matylda manage to involve the entire religious community and many lay people in such a risky activity? What determined her success as a leader of several hundred people in a situation of constant threat to life? What were the foundations of her life and activities? The search for answers to these questions will be made possible by analyzing the written memoirs of Mother Matylda, her autobiographical notes, also the prepared history of the Congregation of the Franciscan Family of Mary and the accounts of the witnesses who were saved.

The present reflections are in the context of her most important virtues, above all the theological ones, that were evident throughout her life, attested to her strength and rendered her influence fruitful. The first to be presented are faith and hope in the life of Mother Matylda Getter, that were crucial in all her binding decisions, followed by her responsible love, maturing over several decades of pursuing her religious vocation. A very important virtue of Mother Matylda Getter as Superior of the province was prudence, the ability to manage a community of several hundred people, dependent on Mother Matylda Getter as Superior, but also co-responsible for her decisions. Another subject of reflection will be her fortitude and love in taking in abandoned, unwanted, orphaned children, as well as children threatened by war and persecution. The conclusion attempts to summarize the observations and show the conclusions drawn from the study.

³ “The example of the superiors worked best, but the top-down initiatives of the religious authorities were realized thanks to the generosity and dedication of the sisters, who carried the burden of responsibility for the safety of those in hiding day and night in children’s homes, educational and nursing institutions, hospitals and homes for the sick.” (Frącek 2018a, 38)

⁴ Livio Melina (2001), in one of his articles on the issues addressed here, argued that the category of virtue makes it possible to grasp the theological dimension of action in the dynamic perspective of the acting subject who seeks fulfillment in love. Thus, this is not just an appeal to the category of example or ontological foundation. There is much more to it. Christocentrism of virtues was advocated by Hans Urs von Balthasar (see 1988, 70–123).

1. Mother Matylda Getter's Faith and Hope Under Conditions of Danger

The dominant value in the life of Mother Matylda Getter was faith in Divine Providence and the resulting Christian attitude of hope. All of her most important life choices, starting with her decision to join a religious congregation, would have to be considered completely illogical and impractical. Even if in many eras taking up the religious life could sometimes be associated with social promotion, securing a stable, though not the easiest, life, and a path of – not only spiritual – development, the situation was completely different during the Partitions of Poland, when Matylda Getter lived. At that time, anti-Polish and anti-Catholic policies prevailed in the Polish territories under the Russian partition; as a result, religious congregations were banned, and the existing communities were already condemned to extinction. The uncertainty of tomorrow, the constant menace of police investigation, and the lack of all legal and financial safeguards meant that committing one's strength and health, in the name of Christ, to social work with no stable prospects for the future, was in itself proof of great faith and trust in Divine Providence. Matylda Getter accepted these commitments and subordinated her life to them. The nineteenth century did not encourage women's independence; deprived of many political and social rights, and deprived of the right to wear the habit, the Franciscan Sisters of the Family of Mary were regarded as "old maids" and were of little importance in society.⁵

Matylda Getter's decision to give her life, health and strength to an unofficially operating religious congregation could only have resulted from her faith in her own vocation and God's invitation, God's faithfulness and an all-predicting Providence. This faith was strongly linked to a sense of responsibility for the country, for the children and young people, for the Church; but it carried a risk far greater than, for example, accepting a religious vocation in the midst of peace, in a country guaranteeing the possibility for religious congregations to function and carry out their official activities. Only having hope in God's protection could bring peace of heart in such a situation.

The constant threat of the tsarist police and the real danger of arresting the sisters and losing the schools and orphanages they ran made it difficult to plan and develop a religious community, so the idea of the Mother Superiors to merge the Franciscan Sisters of the Family of Mary with the international, already officially operating Congregation of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary may have seemed reasonable. This step was taken in accordance with canon law, thus giving the sisters the status of belonging to a regular order, approved by the Holy See (Frącek 1994, 91;

⁵ The establishment and activities of dozens of religious congregations active in the territory of Poland have not always been remarked upon by historians, e.g. for example, there is no discussion of such social groups in the popular awareness of the time (Kita, Klempert 2014).

cf. 2018a, 18–19). The Sisters of the Family of Mary gained a much greater sense of security and the advantages of an international community. Realistically, however, this meant that the Family of Mary, absorbed by the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, practically ceased to exist, and the French superiors resigned from their work in Polish territory and were willingly sending abroad Polish women who had been educated and formed through the efforts of the Family of Mary community.

It was only through faith that Mother Matylda Getter's fairly risky step of separating part of the Sisters of the Family of Mary from the already secure French congregation could have been taken. Mother Matylda wanted to save the identity and traditions of the Polish congregation, which until then had acted according to the principles of its founder, St. Zygmunt Szczęsny Feliński, shaped in the spirit of community unity, without division into two choirs, without strongly accented hierarchy, but with a commitment to the poorest Polish youth, in particular those deprived of educational opportunities. The history of the Congregation of the Franciscan Sisters of the Family of Mary provides evidence that Mother Matylda Getter was right, however, when, in 1914, she courageously, with faith and hope, in defiance of many negative opinions, made on her own the after all risky secession of part of the community of the Family of Mary from the international congregation on Polish soil, this choice did not seem at the time to be either reasonable or logical⁶ (Frącek 1994, 91; see 2018a, 25–26). Such a risky decision could only have resulted from her faith in her own vocation and in Divine Providence, interpreted the way the founder of the Family of Mary, Archbishop Zygmunt Szczęsny Feliński, taught it, confirming this faith and hope also in his exile.

With this very courageous decision, resulting from her deep faith, Mother Matylda saved the work of Abp. Feliński in the Polish lands under the Russian partition; bringing it to flourish over time. She saw the fruits of this hope as the superior of the community of the Franciscan Sisters of the Family of Mary, as together with the Superior General and her sisters she founded more than twenty homes for children and young people, various schools, also orphanages and care institutions⁷

⁶ The decision of mother Getter was accepted by 20 sisters in three homes: two in Warsaw, in Hoża and Żelazna streets and a home with a school for children in Kostowiec near Pruszków, while 10 homes and more than 100 sisters remained with the Missionaries. The situation of those 20 sisters stabilized when in 1919 they merged with the Lviv community of the Family of Mary, hitherto cut off by the Partitions of Poland. This merger was supported by Card. Aleksander Kakowski and Mons. Achilles Ratti, Apostolic Visitor to Warsaw who later was elected Pope Pius XI. From Lviv's Family of Mary, which already had papal approval, the union was joined by ca. 500 sisters, and by 80 from Warsaw. Of the Family of Mary, 580 sisters began their work in independent Poland. Meanwhile, all the homes they inherited from the Missionary Sisters of the Family of Mary had collapsed.

⁷ Matylda Getter was constantly founding new homes for children; in 1919, an orphanage was established in Zamoyskiego Street in Warsaw, in 1920 "Zosinek" was founded in Międzyzlesie for war orphans; in 1921, an orphanage, kindergarten, and home for the elderly in Sejny and the "Loretto" care center in Warsaw's Praga district; from 1923, there were institutions in Augustów and Chotomów, from 1924, a large orphanage, kindergarten, and school in Płudy, an orphanage and kindergarten in Białoleka, then

(Frącek 2018a, 26–29; cf. Frącek 1994, 92; see Zechenter 2019, 5). Had Mother Matylda not made a very risky secession, these centers would not have been established on Polish soil. Notwithstanding the considerable merits of the Congregation of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary in many countries, it is permissible to emphasize the value of Mother Matylda Getter's responsibility for the commitments she assumed towards her own congregation, towards her compatriots, her confidence in the judgment of Abp. Feliński, who, in creating the Polish congregation, designated to it primarily the tasks in its immediate environment. Matylda Getter herself, with her perfect command of French and German, would have had a much better chance of a more stable life in the international congregation of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, where she could have engaged her energies in much less dangerous activities (Frącek 2018a, 22).⁸ Her secession fostered, above all, better use of the capacities of the Sisters of the Family of Mary, who were very much involved in the upbringing and education of children; whereas in an international congregation, mainly French-speaking, many of the Polish sisters could only do very simple work in various countries, undoubtedly to the benefit of those in need, but not in accordance with their originally chosen and accepted vocation.

Decisive for Mother Matylda was her fidelity to the path indicated by the founder; as she herself reminded the community when accepting the position of superior: "For our Congregation – after God – our Homeland is the greatest moral value. We wish to serve our beloved Homeland first and foremost by educating and instructing the young people entrusted to our care to be good citizens, aware of their duties." (Frącek 2018a, 34)

Mother Matylda Getter's faith led her to a constant, strong commitment throughout her life in very different environments, which she accepted in the Franciscan spirit according to the Founder's will. She was a very well-educated, well-formed, and elegant person, and won acclaim and hearts by working with the same generosity both among well-educated charges, future teachers of new students, which was a great investment for the congregation and by dedicating her time in the poorest environments, from which it was difficult to expect success and fruit adequate to the work devoted to them (Frącek 2018a, 3; see Zechenter 2019, 4–5).⁹

"Ulanówek" in Międzyzlesie, an orphanage in Ostrów Mazowiecka, the "Jutrzenka" children's home in Pustelnik (today Marki) and others.

⁸ Matylda Getter was held in high esteem in the congregation, e.g. Superior General Florentyna Dymman and the Superior of the Odesa house, Maria Drzewiecka, chose her twice as a traveling companion to Rome (1893, 1900).

⁹ From 1903 she was entrusted with the office of educator at the most prestigious Establishment of the Family of Mary in St. Petersburg, which was founded as early as 1859 Abp. Feliński. This school and orphanage were considered exemplary, among the best in all of Russia. After the death of Mother Superior F. Dymman in 1906, Mother Getter was appointed secretary to the new superior, Mother Kazimiera Herman. Matylda Getter was able to find her way in both the elite environment of St. Petersburg and the poor Jewish quarters of Odesa, the so-called Mołdawianka.

Only strong Christian faith and hope can explain also her very risky and self-sacrificing commitment during the Second World War on behalf of the Polish population in hiding from the German occupiers, above all the incomparable effort to protect several hundred adults and children of Jewish origin isolated by German orders (“Rozporządzenie” 1939, 2077). As early as 1939, the Germans began resettling Jews in designated quarters in several cities and were introducing further restrictions, imposing penalties for leaving a district without permission and for helping a Jew. According to Hans Frank’s decree of October 15, 1941, Poles would be punished with the death penalty for hiding Jews; in November 1941, this regulation was tightened, forbidding to offer any form of assistance, therefore also, for example, to give food, to a Jew. On October 28, 1942, a decree of the SS commander in the Warsaw District, and from November 10, in the General Governorate, informed that it was punishable by death for Poles to give aid to Jews, but also for concealing information about their presence in the area. Unlike in the Western countries occupied by Germany, in the Polish territories, an immediate execution was carried out on the spot (“an Ort und Stelle”) for giving bread or water to a Jew. The principle of collective responsibility was strictly adhered to: together with the “guilty,” their children, parents, wives, and husbands were killed. Whoever took in Jews risked the life of the whole family.

Many witnesses emphasized in their written memoirs that the driving force for all the dangerous actions of Mother Matylida was her living faith. Fearing a real, constant threat, she held onto the conviction that she was acting according to God’s will and could count on divine providence in every situation (Frącek 2018b, 174–75). Well aware of street roundups of passers-by, also of executions for helping Jews, Mother Matylida declared that “in the name of Christ” she could not refuse shelter to anyone (Frącek 2018a, 41) and with great hope assured the children, terrified by the brutality of the German soldiers, that there was a chapel in the house and no one would be hurt (Frącek 2018a, 68). This faith in the importance of the presence of the Blessed Sacrament guided her at all times; in a situation of danger, she prayed, confident in God’s protection (Frącek 2018a, 64). This faith urged her to receive every Jewish child, whose concealment, after all, entailed mortal danger, and to treat them as sent from God; in this spirit, she asked the Franciscan Sisters of the Family of Mary, anticipating: “Will you, Sister, accept God’s blessing?” (Frącek 2018a, 71) She viewed her everyday life, and the lives of others, in a spirit of faith and hope, whether doing great deeds or ordinary ones such as cooking soup for the hungry, taking care of trifles, or symbolically celebrating birthdays or vows of both lay and religious during the fighting of the Warsaw Uprising, which proved that faith results in love and kindness towards everyone in everyday life.

2. Mother Matylda Getter's Love Towards her Charges in Her Everyday Life

Mother Matylda Getter at all times offered love in its practical dimension; most importantly, a love that was legible and understandable to those around her, irrespective of the age and background of her charges. Despite the many changes of the workplace and the ever-growing circle of charges, their relatives, and successive generations of nuns, she was called diminutively “Matusia” (Mommy) throughout her adult life. Her strong, determined character, indomitable will, iron self-discipline, dutifulness, and energy of action were combined with great kindness and personal charm, which gave her great power of influence and strengthened her authority. Even the first surviving recollections of the female charges from St Petersburg prove that at an early age, Mother Matylda attracted attention even in the select circle of female teachers and educators of one of the most admired educational centers in all of Russia. The charges recalled that “the strongest, radical influence on the young people was exerted by the mistress, the good young Mother Matylda Getter, whose tact and balance combined with great kindness, exquisite elegance, charming grace, were complemented with the originality of the way she interacted with the young people and influenced their psyche.” (Frącek 2018a, 16–17) This combination of self-imposed demands, constant development of virtues, and mastery of the weaker points of her character enabled Mother Matylda Getter to educate and supervise her co-workers with great benevolence and, at the same time, to clearly set boundaries and show the goals set. With this practical, kindly love, Mother Matylda surrounded girls from indigent families of the Polish diaspora in St. Petersburg at the end of the 19th century, also poor youth from the provinces of the tsarist empire, and later Warsaw street children and orphans, the homeless, those who came every day for meals served at the home of the Franciscan Sisters of the Family of Mary, and soldiers of the First World War. Out of sheer benevolence, she showed and recommended to the sisters care and concern not only for the Poles, but also for the Russian soldiers, whom she might have treated as occupants of her own homeland (Getter 2007, 164–65; cf. Frącek 2018a, 23–24),¹⁰ but her spiritual formation enabled her to see the human being beyond national and political divisions.

At the same time, she was fully aware of her vocation, which she discovered in conversations with her confessor; when she declared her desire for a monastic life and considered joining the Carmel, she heard: “You will go to the Family of Mary because it is now necessary to save poor children and work for the country”

¹⁰ During the First World War, in July 1915, Mother Matylda set up a hospital for Russian soldiers who had been severely poisoned with chlorine by the Germans at Bolimów near Łowicz, among whom were also Poles from the Tsarist conscription. She then ran a day-care center with meals for children and adolescents, and at the convent gate the sisters fed dozens of poor people every day, see 2 photographs of the hospital and the sick with the medical staff (Zechenter 2019, 6).

(Frącek 2018a, 9). Mother Matylda put these words into practice for more than 80 years very strictly, striving to secure not only the basic needs of her charges.

She also showed the practical dimension of love as the superior of the Family of Mary in Warsaw's Praga district, when, in the years 1919–1925 and 1927–1937, she created, in agreement with the Superior General, educational centers, especially for orphans and abandoned children, i.a. a nursing home in Międzylesie (1920), another in Sejny, in Warsaw's Praga district, then in Augustów and Chotomów (1923), Płudy (1924), Białoleka (1926), another in Międzylesie (1927), Pustelnik (1928), Brańszczyk and Struga (1929), Studzieniczna (1930), Raków (1932), Ostrołęka (1934), Dłutowo (1934), Dzisna (1935), Wirów and Mickuny (1936), and Niekasieck (1937). The smallest of the homes received 30 boys, the largest – 200 girls. She carefully chose the location of the centers, taking care to provide opportunities for the charges to play in the greenery close to home and fostering good relationships between the children. A good family atmosphere, a suitable neighbourhood and the close presence of a school were important to Mother Matylda, but she created her own schools on the premises if necessary. She genuinely wanted to create a home for the orphans and took care to avoid an atmosphere typical of an orphanage. Houses were given names that evoked good associations, e.g. “Zosinek,” “Ulanówek,” “Strzecha chłopięca” (Boys' Thatch), “Jutrzenka” (Morning Star) and others (Frącek 1980, 21–78).

Larger institutions were also organized in a well-thought-out way, e.g. in the largest center in Płudy, Mother Getter divided 200 girls into smaller groups, the so-called “little families,” living in small houses, which she gave nice names, e.g. “Zacisze” (Retreat), “Chochlik” (Fairy), “Echo,” “Kościuszek,” “Kruszyna,” “Polonka,” “Rusalka” (Frącek 2018a, 37–30). This attentiveness and care of Mother Matylda influenced both the Franciscan Sisters of the Family of Mary and the charges. The cordial atmosphere in the centers supported education and upbringing. The sisters used the system of “little families,” facilitating mutual support and relationships between children of different ages. A loving effort was made to ensure that care in the nursing homes was adapted to the needs and abilities of the children (Frącek 1980, 169–203).

The courageous decisions of Mother Matylda Getter were combined with composure, excellent situational awareness, organizational skills, and prudence. The often risky decisions made in a spirit of faith turned out to be excellent choices, confirmed with energy, work, effort and commitment, and bore visible good fruit. (Frącek 1980, 204–30).

The Franciscan Sisters of the Family of Mary fully approved of her authority. At the age of 66, in 1936, she became Superior of the Warsaw Province, which comprised 404 sisters, working in 44 monastic homes in 6 dioceses and four provinces. She thus served the office of superior, focusing on the care of children from poor families and expanding the scope of her activities each year. During the tenure of Mother Matylda before the war, sisters in the Warsaw province taught in ten common schools, five of

which were owned by the congregation, ran twenty-one orphanages, eight day-care centers for children from poor families, seven boarding schools for secondary school female students, a Warsaw hostel for working girls, sisters also worked in three hospitals and three outpatient clinics for the sick and visited the poor sick in their homes (Frącek 1980, 204–57).

Mother Matylda Getter's social and educational activities attracted the attention of local authorities in many cities, but also in small towns, where her effective organization of schools completely transformed the community. Appreciating the strength of her leadership, her skills, the level of education and training provided in the sisters' homes, and the generosity, and openness of the institutions, Mother Matylda was conferred, with the decree of the President of the Republic of Poland on April 30, 1925, with the Order of Polonia Restituta with the conferral of the Officer's Cross, then for the subsequent years of further persevering activity she was awarded the Golden Cross of Merit on November 9, 1931 (Frącek 2018a, 3, 33).

For all witnesses at the time, the faith, self-sacrificing love, perseverance, and energy of Mother Getter; her achievements would have been more than sufficient to recognize her as one of the most outstanding Polish women of the first half of the 20th century. It seems, however, that she has not been adequately recognized in writing and historical studies.

Her enormous influence both on the children themselves brought up in so many educational centers and schools, and on the spirituality and formation of the sisters of the ever-growing congregation, then one of the largest in Poland certainly deserves recognition. She led the congregation for three consecutive three-year terms (1936–1945). Turning 70, she could consider her life to have been sacrificial and successful; no one could have expected more commitment from her. However, looking at her increased activity during the Second World War, one can see that her faith, love, and hope grew steadily, while her authority, developed through years of monastic leadership, further defined the paths of the Warsaw Province.

3. Prudence in Leading the Community

Mother Matylda Getter's fortitude and courage, evident throughout the war, were combined with prudence. In keeping with her long experience as a superior, she was concerned first and foremost with the community; during the occupation, she took care to maintain the unity and spirit of the congregation. In five years, she convened six conventions of home superiors, making it possible to exchange experiences despite obstacles to correspondence. Every year she organized at least three series of common retreats for the sisters, which provided an opportunity for meeting, formation, and spiritual support. Separately, she took care of retreats supporting superior

sisters. She regularly organized meetings of the provincial council, with 59 meetings held during the occupation. She kept a rich correspondence, supporting the sisters spiritually through circular and private letters (Frącek 1981, 80–124). At the same time, she inspired and recommended the improvement of the sisters' education; on her initiative, during the occupation, about 60 sisters graduated from the clandestine Pedagogical Lyceum, pedagogical-educational and catechetical courses (Frącek 1981, 127–68). This method of managing the monastic community enhanced the spiritual development of the sisters, as well as their relationships with each other. It was evident that Mother Matylda Getter cared not only for those at risk and in need of protection but for the congregation as a whole.

In the current situation, she was involved in helping arrested sisters, seeking their release, in the meantime sending them parcels as far as this was allowed. At the same time, she substituted them in their duties, for example during the imprisonment of the provincial superior of Poznań, Mother Maria Parlińska (1941), imprisoned in the Bojanowo camp, Mother Matylda took over the care of the homes of the Congregation in the Land of Warta, then, in the same situation, she took over responsibility for the houses of the Lwów and Poznań Provinces within the General Governorate. Despite the extremely difficult conditions of the occupation, she opened 13 new monastic homes (Frącek 1981, 79–125). Prudent efforts to maintain the spirit in the congregation made possible intense activity during the occupation and the congregation's strong commitment to help civilians, underground movements (Frącek 1981, 275–85), the imprisoned (Frącek 1981, 269–75); people hiding from the Gestapo (Frącek 1981, 265–69) and Jews, destined by the German occupiers for total extermination (Frącek 1981, 423–24).

The incomparable altruism of Mother Matylda Getter in rescuing children and adults of Jewish origin who were in immediate danger of death during the German occupation is strongly emphasized; it was known that Poles rescuing Jews were punished by being shot on the spot or sent to one of the German extermination camps. Mother Matylda had long had many good contacts with the Jewish community; she grew up in Warsaw on Krochmalna Street, associated as a typical Jewish street, as a nun she was the superior of an orphanage for poor children (1898–1903) in the Jewish suburb of Odesa, the so-called Moldawianka (Frącek 2018a, 5, 13). Among the charges there were also children of Jewish origin.

The experience of taking responsibility for several decades, but also the children entrusted to her by their parents and orphans motivated Mother Matylda during the war to take in Jewish children from the ghetto, at risk of death at any time, often hungry and wandering without a roof over their heads (Smólski 1961, 1964, 1981; Wroński and Zwolakowa 1971; Bartoszewski and Lewinówna 1966; Kurek 1992). Sometimes these children were brought to the convent by their parents or friends; sometimes lonely children came to the convent on their own, overcoming a great many obstacles and dangers (Tyndorf and Zieliński 2023, 134, 236, 241;

cf. Puścikowska 2019, 105–21; cf. Petrowa-Wasilewicz 2021). Taking in Jewish children risked death not only for Mother Matylda Getter but also for the community of sisters, according to the rules introduced by the German occupier. The children themselves were also aware of the danger, as their accounts written down years later indicate, for example, by Małgosia Frydman Mirska: “Taken out from the Warsaw Ghetto, hidden in turns by many people, in the face of danger she herself came with her younger sister to the nuns’ convent at Hoża Street: I was terribly afraid, [...]. Passing through the gate, I was aware that my drama would be decided behind it: life or death. Mother Superior Matylda Getter looked at us and said: yes – I accept. It seemed to me that the heavens had opened up to me.” (Cf. Acher 2011; Tyndorf and Zieliński 2023, 236)

In keeping with her vocation, her many years of religious formation and her accepted principles of engagement, Mother Matylda Getter believed that assistance to children and adults of all backgrounds and creeds was a result of a divine mandate and acted in accordance with the rule written down by the founder, Abp. Feliński, for whom of particular importance were the words: “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45) and “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me” (Matt 18:5; cf. Mark 9:36–37).

4. Love Requiring Fortitude

The Synoptics found it very important to record the words of Jesus equating taking in a child “in his Name” with taking in himself and even the Father himself.¹¹ This sentence motivated and inspired the activity of many religious congregations who took in abandoned children, orphans, also from very poor families, literally as if they were welcoming Jesus himself.¹² Mother Matylda, accepting the inspiration of Abp. Feliński, took this invitation as the motto of her life, taking orphans and abandoned children into her care, meeting their needs to the best of her ability. This vocation, pursued for decades, took on a new and dramatic dimension during the Second World War. The literal fulfillment of this evangelical invitation of Jesus undertaken during the German occupation of Polish lands was associated with great risk and

¹¹ The words recorded by Mark and Luke seem to coincide, to receive a child in Jesus’ name means to receive the Son of God and, through him, the Father himself, cf. “And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, ‘Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me’” (Mark 9:36). Cf. “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me” (Matt 18:5), “Whoever receives this child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me” (Luke 9:47–48).

¹² The evangelical words of Mark and Matthew were chosen by Abp. Feliński as a motto, see Feliński 1888.

an immediately enforced death sentence for those who received people, including children of Jewish origin. Undoubtedly, during the German occupation of Polish lands, most Jewish children were saved thanks to Mother Matylda Getter (Tyndorf and Zieliński 2023, 236, 240–41; See Frącek 1982, 285–300). The Babylonian Talmud, intended for Jews in the Diaspora, appreciated the importance and value of welcoming children, especially orphans; at the same time, while not explicitly prescribing heroic deeds, rather anticipating their possibility, it emphasizes the importance of supporting and saving even one person.¹³ It should be noted that in the case of the activities of the Congregation of the Franciscan Sisters of the Family of Mary, this refers to several hundred people, most of them children.

As a result of helping the Jews, the Sisters of the Franciscan Family of Mary saved the lives of more than 800 Jews, including more than 500 children and young people, and more than 250 elderly people. They hid more than 300 children in their own orphanages and boarding schools, about 120 children in other homes of their own congregation, and more than 80 in private families. In monastic homes, the Franciscan Sisters of the Family of Mary hid around 150 elderly people and mediated the hiding of about 100 Jews in private homes. They also provided short-term assistance to approximately 400 people and, for a longer period of time, they helped more than 100 people (Frącek 1981, 300). This is a unique contribution of the Sisters of the Family of Mary to the effort to help the Jews. (Tyndorf and Zieliński 2023, 187; Frącek 2006). However, about 3 million of them died.

Mother Matylda regarded the question of accepting Jewish children as a matter of faith. Her fortitude stemmed primarily from her conviction that the Family of Mary could not refuse to accept Jewish children in the name of Christ; she prompted the sisters to heroic acts by asking a previously agreed-upon question (Frącek 2018a, 70–71).¹⁴ The great faith and steadfast hope of Mother Matylda emanated on her fellow sisters. Understanding the risk to the whole congregation and its work, she had previously considered the situation in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament and gained, as she claimed, absolute conviction that she was acting in accordance with God's will, accepting Christ himself and following the principles of the Family of Mary.

The provincial home in Warsaw at Hoża 53 Street became a place of reception for Jewish children who had to be issued new documents and find a place in one of the congregation's orphanages. Mother Matylda Getter opened all the homes of her province to the persecuted, and in every orphanage, monastic home, and mission she was undertaking, Jews were hidden. The elderly, whose appearance betrayed

¹³ Whoever kills a person, it is as if he has killed the whole of humankind, and whoever saves the life of a person is as if he has saved the life of the whole of humankind (cf. *Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin*, n.d., 37a).

¹⁴ "Will you accept God's blessing, Sister?", asked Mother Getter to Mother Superior Tekla Budnowska. The answer to this question was: "Yes, I will accept." That blessing was a Jewish child, in this case, the war child Danka Markowska, or rather Janka Dawidowicz (now living in London), whom Mother Getter moved from Płudy to Warsaw for safety (Frącek 2018, 70–71, photograph of Janka, 69).

their origins, she placed in the homes of private friends of the congregation, keeping a constant eye on their needs and safety. In this way, endangering the entire congregation, she saved several hundred Jewish children and adults, inspiring the admiration of witnesses and survivors (Szymańska 1979, 203–5; cf. Puścikowska 2019, 105–21; Petrowa-Wasilewicz 2021; see Tyndorf and Zieliński 2023, 187, 192, 134), she was awarded in 1985 the “Righteous Among the Nations” medal; the ceremony of awarding the medal and diploma and planting a tree in the Garden of the Righteous was held on September 14, 1986 (Frącek 2018a, 73–77).

As far as possible, almost all of the homes of the Franciscan Sisters of the Family of Mary were involved in helping the civilian population. For example, at the provincial home, Mother Matylda enabled the shelter of some 500 refugees in 1939, treated as needed by the nursing station (Frącek 2018b, 190). Throughout the occupation, Mother was in charge of the kitchen serving meals to approx. 300 people a day, and during the Warsaw Uprising 1100 people, insurgents and civilians. The congregation continually supported those arrested, and a center for the production of new documents for people wanted by the Gestapo, cooperating with the underground prison cells, operated in the provincial home (Frącek 1981, 258–300).

At the same time, Mother Matylda Getter consistently and calmly took care of orphans and abandoned children. She took in all, without exception, children left behind by those arrested and forced into hiding from the German occupiers (Frącek 1981, 265–66). Thanks to her management and dedication, 22 orphanages survived in the Warsaw province; after the forced liquidation of a few of them, Mother Matylda Getter founded nine new ones. There was a steady increase in the number of children in need of care due to executions and round-ups. Mother Matylda continually organized education in the orphanages, and effectively maintained an atmosphere of peace and security and cared for material conditions.

In 1944, the headquarters of the Warsaw Province at Hoża 53 Street, with the consent of mother Matylda, housed the headquarters of the commander of District VII “Obroża” of the Home Army, Lt. Col. Kazimierz Krzyżak, pseud. “Kalwin,” and the Zaremba-Piorun grouping, fighting in the section of Emilia Plater, Koszykowa, Wilcza and Wspólna Streets – a point of support and sustenance. Mother Getter, in cooperation with the leadership of the Home Army “Obroża,” donated the premises of the boarding house for the creation of an insurgent hospital for all the wounded, later moved for safety reasons to the PZU building on Poznańska Street. She and her sisters also took care of feeding the Home Army command, the covering company, the hospital doctors, and medical staff (Frącek 1981, 282), and had an insurgent hospital set up for the wounded.

With the end of the war in 1945, her term as provincial superior, which had been extended as a result of the war, came to an end. At the age of 75, she became Superior of the Warsaw home on Hoża Street, elected for consecutive three-year terms

until 1954 (Getter [n.d.]). She died in Warsaw on August 8, 1968, in an atmosphere of universal respect (Frącek 2018a, 60–61).

Mother Matylda Getter was awarded the Officer's Cross of the Order of Polonia Restituta on April 30, 1925, even before the Second World War, "for her merits in the field of child hygiene and child care in the country" and, in recognition of her subsequent activities, she was awarded the Golden Cross of Merit on November 9, 1931 (Frącek 2018b, 174). Due to her significant involvement during the Warsaw Uprising, she was awarded the Golden Cross of Merit with Swords on September 27, 1944. After the war, it was not until January 17, 1985, that she was awarded the Righteous Among the Nations Medal for rescuing Jews during the German occupation (Frącek 2018a, 73–74). Also posthumously, on October 24, 2018, she was awarded the Grand Cross of the Order of Polonia Restituta "for the heroic attitude and extraordinary courage shown in saving the lives of Jews during the Second World War, for outstanding merits in the defense of dignity, humanity, and human rights."

The surviving memoirs about her depict Mother Matylda as spiritually strong, energetic, at the same time cheerful, even radiant, very intelligent, interested in people and their problems, good and kind. Many testimonies of rescued Jewish children bring the reader closer to their personal encounters with Mother Matylda and the Franciscan Sisters of the Family of Mary, who supported them at the risk of their lives under conditions of occupation. Mother Getter, who remained composed in countless situations of danger, constantly maintaining her peace, faith, hope and valiant charity, virtues which enabled her to work intensely, remained for them an authority figure and a source of reassurance. She had a special gift of prayer and devotion to Divine Providence and a strong spiritual, moral, and, above all, aretological formation.

Conclusion

Acquiring good in any area of life is related to action, and action should be conscious and purposeful, and skillfully aimed at achieving good. A person who makes the effort to acquire perfection objectively perfects themselves. Virtue becomes the cause of their goodness. Practiced virtue transforms a person, and makes them more perfect.¹⁵ Moreover, virtue does not allow evil, it does not allow vice, which is its opposite. Virtue is, as it were, the moral armor that protects an individual from neglecting

¹⁵ The definition of virtue given by Aristotle (*Ethica nicomachea* 1106a; 2,6,3; LCL 73, 91) expresses it extremely aptly: "excellence or virtue in a man will be the disposition which renders him a good man and also which will cause him to perform his function well."

the good. It is what makes a person undertake a particular action leading to the good or the fulfillment of the good itself willingly, immediately, and with satisfaction.

The aim of human action is the good, which is human life. It is both given and assigned to a human being. Moreover, life is the good of every person, hence it is a common good and the cause of social life (Kiereś 2021, 296–99).

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that the attitude of Mother Matylda Getter, who had a deep faith in Divine Providence and personal contact with Christ, was made possible by a strong, carefully developed Christian arethology. She discerned what the true good was in her life, as well as in the lives of those who played a role in her life. Her actions in practice have resulted in so much good.

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