

St. Maximilian Kolbe

Passages from the book: RITRATTI DI SANTI by Antonio Sicari ed. Jaca Book



Today we are before a luminous countenance; St. Maximilian Kolbe, to whom everyone, even non-believers, willingly pay courtesy and of whom all speak with reverence. The fact that he offered his life with love and his martyrdom at Auschwitz, in ransom for the dignity of the oppressed, is sufficient to draw a multitude of sympathy towards 'the' person of Maximilian Kolbe.

What we would rather try to do is, to learn to understand the 'meaning' of his gesture, which was to become so decisive on the background of his whole existence: on his vocation, his cultivated ideals, his tireless activity, his 'persistent' missionary, even in doing so, to some it may still seem that it was entirely "excessive integrity", that which instead, expressed the integrity of his faith. In doing so, we shall not risk artificially separating his death from his life style.

Fr. Maximilian Kolbe was a son of his times and of his country. Born in 1894 in a small Polish town, where his parents ran a humble weaving laboratory. He died at 47 years of age in Auschwitz in 1941. At the age

of 13, he entered the seminary of the Conventual Franciscans in 1907; and in 1910, at 16 years old he became a novice.

From 1912 up to 1919 he studied philosophy and theology in Rome. Obtaining a degree in philosophy in 1915 and a degree in theology in 1919. He was interested in physics and mathematics and succeeded in projecting new types of aeroplanes and other apparatus.

While in Rome, he happened to be present during a procession of anticlerical-Freemasons, which were celebrating Giordano Bruno, hoisting a black flag with the effigy of Lucifer in the act of defeating St. Michael the Archangel. In St. Peter's square leaflets were handed out, on which were written: "*Satan must reign in the Vatican and the Pope must be his servant.*"

Young Maximilian has a chivalrous concept of life, on the style of the antique mediaeval knights: but his lady is the Virgin Mary.

He is convinced the "Era of the Immaculate", has begun, that in which the Virgin Mary must, according to the Book of the Genesis, crush the head of the serpent.



He writes:

"This truth must be sown in the hearts of all mankind, those who are living now and in those who will live until the end of all times, and take care of its growth and the fruits of sanctification; the Immaculate must be introduced to the hearts of men, and so enable Her to rise the throne of her Son in them, and draw all mankind to the knowledge of Him and inflame them with love for the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus".

Kolbe, on his part, has a total and tender devotion to Our Lady: he calls the Madonna with the most tender and familiar names, as only the Polish know how to do, deeply convinced that all Christians must become "*Knights of the Immaculate*", and so he founded an association; the "*Immaculate Militia*", of which we have the autographed statute. The first words in regards to the aim of the association are the following:

"The perseverance in the conversion of sinners, of heretics, of schismatic, of Jews, etc., and above all the Freemasonry's (this word was underlined twice); and most important again, the sanctification of all mankind under the patronage and through the mediation of the Blessed Virgin

Mary".

This was alluding to the accusation of integrity that Fr. Kolbe would bring upon himself, the accusation of many modern well thinking and fussy Christians. In fact the Immaculate Militia has no spiritual programme, it does not have a "religious option" but a global choice.

Here it is:

"With the help of God we must do in such a manner that the faithful Knights of the Immaculate shall be found everywhere, but especially in important environments such as:

- a) in places for the education of the youth (professors of scientific institutes, teachers, sport centres);
- b) in directing of the public opinions of the mass-media (magazines, newspapers, their coverage and publishing, public libraries, in library clubs and circles, conferences, in cinemas);
- c) the Fine Arts, sculpture, music, painting, and theatre.

The Immaculate Militia became the first pioneers in all fields, and guides to the sciences (natural science, history, literature, medicine, law, exact science, etc.).

Under our influence and under the protection of the Immaculate, the industrial complexes, businesses, the banks, rose and flourished.

In a single word, the Militia impregnated everything, and in a single spirit healed, strengthened and generated everything for Gods major glory, through the means of the Immaculate and for the well being of the community".

How was this project achieved? Simply incredible for the position and possibility of one single man.

In 1927 he began to build an entire city, about 40 Kms. from Warsaw, starting from nothing. He spoke of this city as a second Warsaw of the future. He named the city "Niepokalanow": the city of the Immaculate.

Inside a few years the first achievement is described:



"A vast free area for the construction of the great basilica of the Immaculate..."

An editorial-complex, which included the editing, the library, the typotech, the linotypist's laboratory, the zincography with photographic laboratories, the typographies....., and various other departments for stiff binding, warehouses and consignment of merchandise.

The left wing of the building was divided in distinct buildings, which held, the chapel the living quarters for the religious, the postulant quarters, the noviciate, the general management, the infirmary, e somehow distant from these, the power station. Scattered here and there were, the

blacksmiths and mechanics workshops, the joiners, shoemakers and dressmakers laboratories, and also the bricklayers and fire brigade depots.

But it did not end here: there was a machinery park, a small railway station with railway tracks that joined the public and state railways; an airport with four aircraft's was foreseen and in projects a broadcasting radio station.

All over the area there were huge tree trunks, depots for wood, tubes and various types of building material."

Maximilian Kolbe's gift in attracting others to follow him in his knightly ideal is confirmed by the following data-base: after about ten years, Niepokalanow, there were 762 religious, composed of: 13 ordained

priests, 18 minor clerks, 527 religious lay- brothers, 122 aspirant priests, 82 aspirant religious lay-brothers.

When Maximilian Kolbe touched Polish ground, on his return from Rome as a priest, the number of religious in the Franciscan province counted little more than a hundred. The Niepokalanow religious were to live in poverty but have at their disposition what was the best on the market: from the latest in aeroplanes to the latest in rotary printing presses.

Maximilian's friars were capable of almost everything. In organising the fire brigade corps, in preparing for obtaining pilot licences, in studying to become orchestra conductors, so as to be enabled to personally take care of the recording of records, and learning the systems of cinema production.

Fr. Maximilian Kolbe who founded and directed this enormous community during its first years, and he remained, however, always the animator, is described as follows:

"He was tenacious, persistent, implacable...He was a born calculator: calculating and comparing, valuing, deciding, combining budgets and estimated costs, incessantly. He was an expert in everything; engines, bicycles, linotypes, radio; he knew what cost little and what cost less and what was expensive; he knew where, how and when it was opportune to buy...The wasn't a communication system to fast for him, the vehicle of missionary, he often said, should be as efficient as the latest model of an aeroplane."

On the contrary, the life of the entire community, is described and explained by Fr. Maximilian Kolbe using the following words:

"Our community has a life style which is a heroic in a way, what Niepokalanow is and has to be if it is really to reach the aim prefixed, that is to say, not only to defend the faith, to contribute to the salvation of souls, but by daring attack, regardless of ourselves, gaining one soul after the other for the Immaculate, one output after another, hoisting her flag on the publishing houses of newspapers, of the periodical and non periodical press, on the press agencies, on the radio transmitting aerials, on the artistic and literature institutes, on theatres, on cinemas, on parliaments, on the senates, in one simple word, all over the world; and also to keep watch in order to prevent that anyone ever be enabled to remove those flags.

Then, all forms of socialism, of communism, of heresy, of atheism, the freemasonry and all other similar foolishness that is caused by sin, will disappear...That is how I imagine Niepokalanow"

In this "new city" eight magazines are printed with several hundreds of thousand of copies. The most important of these is, "The knight of the Immaculate", which in those years reached a million copies. Fr. Maximilian Kolbe foresees the translation of this in Italian, English, French, Spanish and Latin.

Fr. Kolbe will not live for long in Niepokalanow. In 1930 he is in Japan where he founded, starting here also from nothing, a similar city which he names "The Garden of the Immaculate".

An author who is critical to Kolbe's work writes:

"His aim was no more nor less than to conquer the world. For this reason he went to Japan to convert the 'pagans'; for the same reason he incessantly enlarged his publishing house, founded monasteries, he dreamt of plans to extend the Immaculate Militia to the whole world.

He created from nothing, all these opera, conceived on a giant scale. Without a penny in his pocket, questioning without end, in his proverbial patched monk's frock. He was a pheromone of energy and talent in organising. Literally beginning every initiative with his own hands. He mixed lime and carried bricks on the site; he worked at the layout type cases in typography. In Nagasaki he started the editing of the local version of the "The Knight of the Immaculate", not knowing a word of Japanese...."

During the time the Japanese branch was being built, he slept in a loft using a coat to cover him.

His Immaculate Militia in 1939 counted 8000.000 members.

Fr. Kolbe would say; "*We will embrace the whole world*", and he had plans regarding India and the Arabian countries.

In 1932, when Niepokalanow was being built, he decided that there would be only one small place, the cemetery, because he said: "I foresee that the bones of my brothers will be scattered all over the world".

Therefore, what was his ideal? This:

"We must flood the world in a deluge of Christian and Marian press, in every language, everywhere, in order to drown in the vortex of truth every manifestation of error which has found a strong ally in its publications; we must wrap the world in printed paper with words of life in order to give it back the joy of living".

Fr. Kolbe's theology was radical and without compromises. The following is how one of his biographies is syn-tonized:

"He persists in believing, in saying, in writing that the truth is one only. Therefore only one God, only one Saviour, only one Church; the consequences are that man, all mankind are called to accept one sole God, one sole Saviour and one sole Church.

His whole life as a " missionary of the pen", as he loved to be defined, is consecrated and sacrificed to that ideal.

This was the man on whom the fury and rage of the nazi's fell. He knew perfectly well what was in store for him. He had a lot of friends who kept him informed of what was going on. The Nazi secret police even let him know that they would be very pleased if he decided in optioning for a German citizenship if he enrolled on the list of those of German extractions, considering his surname and origins (even though it was quite evident that his mother's surname was polish).

He was arrested for the first time with some of his friars. He consoled them saying: "Have courage, we are going on a mission". At first the City of the Immaculate was turned into a hospital, with an office for the Red Cross. Then it began to be slowly filled with refugees and survivors; they received 2000 Polish exiles and some hundreds of Jews. The Germans began to consider the City as a concentration camp.

After being freed the first time, Fr. Kolbe reorganised the city for the survival of all refugees. He reorganised the infirmary, the hospital, the kitchens, bakeries, vegetable gardens and other laboratories. On the 17 February 1941 he was arrested for the second time. He said: "I am going to serve the Immaculate in another working camp". This new working camp was Auschwitz. All the energy of this physically fragile man (suffering from consumption, with one healthy lung) was now put to comparison with the most atrocious sufferings. A suffering, which will hit him systematically, as it does the other prisoners and even more so, because he belongs to the group of priests, who will also share the hatred and mistreatments, with the Jews.



He becomes number 16670. He begins dragging cartloads of stones and gravel for the building of a wall of the crematorium; these carts were always to be dragged while running. Every ten meters there was a guard armed with a baton who guaranteed the persistent rhythm. Then there was the cutting and transporting of tree trunks. Being a priest, his load was always two or three times heavier than that of his companions. They watch him, bleeding and staggering, but he never wanted them to expose themselves to danger for him: "Do not risk your lives or be beaten for me. The Immaculate will help me, I can do it myself".

When they wanted to take him to the camp hospital, if he had the energy, he always pointed out someone else who, according to him, was in more need of cure than him: "I can wait. Rather him...".

When they set him to transporting corpses, which were horribly mutilated, and piling them to be incinerated, they would hear him praying quietly: "Holy Mary pray for us" and the "Et Verbum

caro factum est" (The Word became flesh).

During the night, in the huts, someone creeps towards him, horror stricken and he hears him, slowly and calmly, like a soothing balsam say: "Hatred is not a strong creative, only love is a strong creative!" The sick and ill called him: "Our little Father".

Then came the day in block 14, when a prisoner succeeded in escaping. Fr. Kolbe had been assigned to that block only a few days before. For three hours all blocks were put standing to attention. At 9 o'clock for their miserable supper, the lines were broken. Block 14 had to remain immobile while their food was poured into a duct.

The following day, the block remained in line constrained to immobility in the square: guarded, beaten, fasting, under the July sun: broken by hunger and heat, immobility, in the terrible waiting for what was going to become of them. Those who fell unable to resist were thrown in a heap on the side of the camp. Then when the other prisoners from the other blocks returned from their work the decimation began: for every runaway prisoner, ten men were condemned to the bunker where death awaited them from starvation. One of these condemned men, at the thought of his wife and children, cried out in pain. All of a sudden the miracle happened. Fr. Maximilian broke the line and coming forward offered his life in place of the mans, a man who he did not even know. The exchange was excepted. God in that instant worked a miracle through Fr. Kolbe's intercession.

We really must reconstruct what happened. Not many were able to hear what was said. Bur many remember one particularity...Kolbe came out of the line and went directly, "walking quickly" towards the Lagerfuehrer Fritsh, who was shocked that a prisoner dared to do such a thing.

Lagerfuegrer Fritsch considered the prisoner's mere numbers.



Fr. Kolbe however, obliged him to remember that they were men, with an identity. "*What does this lurid polish want?*" He asked. Kolbe: "*I am a catholic priest. I am old (he was 47 years old). I want to take his place because he has a wife and children*".

The most incredible thing, was Kolbe's first miracle and that through Kolbe the sacrifice was accepted.

The exchange, with its affirmation of choice of freedom and solidarity, went against all the ideals on which the concentration camp was constructed; the concentration camp was the demonstration that "the ethics of human fellowship", pure cowardice. That the true ethics was the 'race' and those inferior races were

not even 'human'. The humanitarian principle according to the nazi ideology was a Jewish-Christian lie. In the concentration camps it was demonstrated that what is human in man, is in fact that which is most external in man, a mask that can be removed at one's will.

"Concentration camps constituted a fragment of the definitive philosophic debate."
(Szczepanski)

That Fritsch accepted Kolbe's sacrifice and even more so accepted the exchange, (it would have been more in line if he had decided on the death of both men) and therefore the value and effectiveness of the gift, was something incredible. His gesture was a giving of human value to dying, which made dying a voluntary offer and not an act of subjection to force. For Fritsch, this was either a lighting of novelty or the total blindness of someone who no longer believes that those people had any historical significance. In fact there was no human hope that that same act would go beyond the confinements of the concentration camp.

Nor could Fr. Kolbe humanly think of a historical echo of his gesture. But Fr. Kolbe succeeded in physicaly showing that that camp was a Calvary. And I am not referring to a symbolic image. I refer to a Mass.

From that day on, from the moment of acceptance, the camp possessed a sacred place. The condemned are thrown naked into the death block, in the dark, the wait to die from hunger. They are given nothing, not even a drop of water. The long agony was syllabified by the prayers and hymns, which Fr. Kolbe said and sung in a loud voice. And from the nearby cells, the other condemned men answered him:



"The echo of that prayer penetrated through the walls, becoming weaker day after day, changing to a whisper, extinguishing with human breath. The camp turned their ears to those prayers. Each day the news that the praying continued went from one hut to another. The hazy structure of human solidarity began to throb with life again. The death, which was slowly being consumed in the underground of the block 13, was not the death of worms being crushed in the mud. It was both drama and a rite. It was a sacrifice of purification". (Szczepanski).

The fame of what was happening spread to the other concentration camps. Every morning the 'hunger bunker' was inspected.

When the cells were opened the poor wretches cried and begged for bread; those who came near the guards were thrown brutally on the ground.

Fr. Kolbe never asked for anything he didn't complain he just remained sitting at the back, leaning against the wall. The same soldiers look on him with respect. Then the condemned began to die; after two weeks only four of them were still alive, including Fr. Kolbe. In order to force them to die, on the 14th August, they were injected with carbolic acid in their left arms. It was the Eve of one of the Marian Feast days which Maximilian loved more than any other: the Assumption, to whom he sang with pleasure the popular laud that goes: "I shall go to see Her, one day!"

"When I opened the iron door of the cell", the jailer is recalling this, "he was no longer alive; but it seemed to me as if he was. He was still leaning against the wall. His face was strangely radiant. His eyes were wide open and focused on some particular point. His whole body was as if in ecstasy. I will never forget this scene."

Pope John Paul, in a sermon at Auschwitz, said:

"In this place which was built for the purpose of the denial of faith, denial of the faith in God and in the faith of man, and to radically tread down not only love but every sign of human dignity, dignity of humanity, that man (Father Kolbe) carried off the victory through love and faith".

Fr. Kolbe showed, by the strength of his faith, that man can create abyss's of pain but they cannot avoid that they be uninhabited by the Crucified and by the mystery of His suffering love, that is renewed, and that autonomously and with unresistable force decides to make Himself "present". This was the main reason why Fritsch, through Christ's decision, going against his 'ego' had to "accept" the exchange.

Contemplating Fr. Kolbe, there are two lessons, which remain for us: one turns from his martyrdom to his life, the other from his life to his martyrdom.

In the first lesson, Fr. Kolbe tells us that by answering to inhumanity with the offer and sacrifice of oneself is not the answer of someone who does not know any other way, of he that is resigned and gives in to the oppressor, of he who expects everything from the hereafter and therefore can submit.

Fr. Kolbe gave his life, accepting to die, after having used all his energy in the construction of a different world, a new world, of hundreds of the things of this world. Martyrdom was not a devote way of refuge. It was the fulfilment of this vital energy.

In the second lesson, Fr. Kolbe tells us that the makings of martyrs is not that of whom in his life was amused by pluralism and irenismo cost what it may, even if he calls them "dialogue" and "ecumenism".

Certainly there is a proper and right way to consider these values (which is the way of love, and not by the loss of identity), but many times these are used only for preservation, in order not to "give your life".

Fr. Kolbe defined faith with an impressing clearness, and with the same impressing decisiveness he propagandised it and he wanted it to be part of all social and cultural areas of life; he had been so full of love to become the first "martyr of love". With this title, which had never been used before, he was canonised by Pope John Paul II.

But who, in the name of an alleged Christian love, dilutes the faith and makes it objective and unimportant in history is certain to possess that love which qualifies the ability to sacrificing life?

This is the serious question that discriminates and judges all Christian attitudes. Faith and love demand both strength and decision e grow side by side with the same courage.