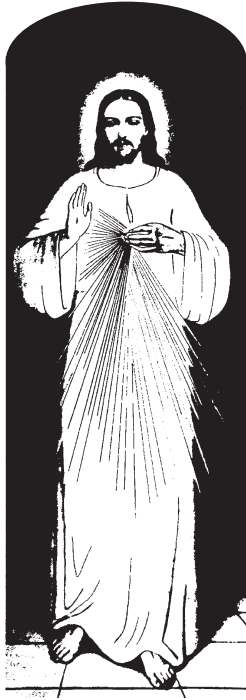


I AM A CATHOLIC PRIEST



Father Maximilian Kolbe's Reply to Priests
Who Question Their Own Identity



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A CATHOLIC PRIEST**

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**Saint Maximilian Maria Kolbe
(1894-1941)**

LOS ANGELES 2019

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God Found Him Worthy of Himself

We entrust to you a brief history of a man in whose life the transparent truth of the Gospel has become a special way: the truth about the power of love. Our hero is Saint Maximilian Maria Kolbe, known not only in the Catholic church, but all over the world, as an exceptional devotee of Our Lady of the Immaculate, poor Franciscan friar, founder of the Militia of the Immaculata (MI), missionary - founder of Polish and Japanese Niepokalanów, an apostolic precursor of the use of contemporary means of social communication. Saint Maximilian is above all an apostle of mercy who showed heroic love in inhumane conditions of a concentration camp during World War II, prisoner and victorious over death by the gift of his life sacrificed for a man unknown to him.

“None has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (Jn 15: 13). It is above all the heroic choice of love that he made that keeps him in the memory of many. We, however, want to know more secrets from his life, his love for God and the Immaculate. Let’s follow his path.

In the Family Home

Saint Maximilian Maria Kolbe was born on January 8, 1894 in Zduńska Wola, Poland. He was the second child of Juliusz and Marianna Dąbrowska, both weavers, at his holy baptism was given the name Raymond. Due to severe economic conditions, the family left for Łódź and eventually settled in Pabianice where his father took a job in a factory, his mother ran a shop and worked as a midwife. Raymond spent his childhood here and helped out in the family store.

Raymond's parents belonged to the Third Order of Saint Francis. At home, they cultivated Christian and patriotic values. Because these were difficult times in the Kingdom of Poland, politically dependent on Russia, the Poles fought to preserve their culture and native language. There were no Polish schools, and the parents did not want to send their children to Russian schools. Raymond received his first lessons at home where he learned to read, write and make calculations, demonstrating great mathematic abilities. In later years Raymond attended a local trading school for one year only.

The Beautiful Lady and The Two Crowns

As a child, Raymond's temperament and personality hinted of his future sanctity and mission. In the words of his mother: "He was always recollected, serious and praying with tears in his eyes." Obedient and trustful, he took the words of his parents to heart. His mother once said to him: "My little child, I don't know what is going to become of you." Raymond dwelt on these words. Noticing that he had become more serious, more prayerful and cried more often, his mother asked him what was wrong. He responded, "When you said to me 'what will become of you?' I prayed very hard to Our Lady to tell me what would become of me. Later in the church I prayed again. Then the Beautiful Lady appeared to me holding in her hands two crowns, one white and one red. She looked at me with love and asked me if I would like to have them. The white meant that I would remain pure and the red that I would be a martyr. I answered 'yes' and that I wanted them both. Then the Virgin looked at me tenderly and disappeared." Raymond kept the miraculous incident hidden in his heart speaking of it only to his mother.

Marian Vocation

In 1907, Conventual Franciscans from Lvov conducted a parish mission in Pabianice. At the end of the parish mission, Raymond



Sundew

and his older brother, Franciszek, decided to join the Conventual Franciscans. With their parents' permission, the two brothers entered a minor seminary in Lvov.

Kneeling before the miraculous image of Our Lady of Grace in the Cathedral in Lvov, Raymond pledged his devotion to Mary. He wrote in his memoirs: *“with my head bent toward the ground, I promised the Blessed Virgin Mary, who reigns on the altar, that I would fight for Her.”* He thought, however, that such a fight could not be led as a priest, so he wanted to leave the seminary.

At this critical moment, his mother visited him in Lvov and confessed to both sons that she and their father made the decision to devote themselves to the service of God. His mother joined the Benedictine sisters in Lvov and his father joined the Franciscans in Krakow. Raymond saw in this the explicit will of God and his destiny to remain in the order. He then asked for admission to the novitiate which began on September 4, 1910. During his investiture, Raymond received the monastic name of Maximilian.

He continued his studies in Kraków where his superiors noting his intelligence sent him to study in Rome at the “Gregorianum” University and at the International Franciscan College “Seraphicum”. Maximilian graduated with two doctorates: In Philosophy and in Theology.

On November 1, 1914, Maximilian made his perpetual vows. His favorite spiritual readings were the “Story of A Soul: The Autobiography of St. Thérèse of Lisieux”, “Glories of Mary” by Saint Alphonsus Maria Liguori, and “True Devotion to Mary” by Saint Louis Marie Grignon de Montfort.

Founder of the Militia of the Immaculata

The Militia of the Immaculate was initiated in the small cell of the Franciscan monastery at Via di San Teodoro in Rome. On October 16, 1917, three days after the final apparition of Our Lady in Fatima and few months before his priestly ordination, Maximilian, together with six other Conventual Franciscan colleagues, founded the Militia Immaculatae. It was a direct

response to a Masonic demonstration which had been held in Saint Peter's Square, in which banners were carried depicting Saint Michael the Archangel being crushed by Lucifer with slogans on them such as, "The devil will govern in the Vatican, and the Pope will act as Swiss Guard for him." By this time Maximilian had discovered how he would engage in the battle as Our Lady's "knight".

His Ideal was chivalrous, but eminently practical: he and his companions would consecrate themselves totally to Our Lady in order to be instruments in her hands for the extension of the Kingdom of the Heart of Jesus. It would be an association with members scattered all over the world who, with prayer and sanctity of life, were to transform the world and live for the Immaculate.

Standing in the great tradition, Maximilian brings a note of urgency about the battle, Mary's "struggle against the infernal serpent" (cf. Gen 3:15) and hence, the all-consuming goal of his life was to mobilize an army, a militia completely at her disposal. This is clearly illustrated in the official Act of Consecration for the Militia Immaculatae: "If it pleases you, use all that I am and have without reserve, wholly to accomplish what was said of you: "She will crush your head," and, "You alone have destroyed all heresies in the world." Let me be a fit instrument in your immaculate and merciful hands for introducing and increasing your glory to the maximum in all the many strayed and indifferent souls, and thus help extend as far as possible the blessed kingdom of the most Sacred Heart of Jesus. For wherever you enter, you obtain the grace of conversion and growth in holiness, since it is through your hands that all graces come to us from the most Sacred Heart of Jesus".

He often said: "Look for the Immaculate. She is your best Mother. She will not abandon you to fate. I know this from my own experience. Trust the Immaculate."



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Apostle of Mary Immaculate

Maximilian was ordained a priest on April 28, 1918 in Rome. After ordination he returned to Poland and began his Marian apostolate. Superiors appointed him as the teacher of History of the Church at the seminary in Krakow. Meanwhile, not only the Franciscans and clergy but also lay people came to the Militia of the Immaculate. On January 2, 1922, approval of the association came from Rome. To fulfill the purpose of the association of the Militia and to maintain contact with its members, the same year, Maximilian began the monthly publication, the *Rycerz Niepokalanej*. (Knight of the Immaculate) in Krakow, which in time gained great popularity in Poland and abroad.

He founded this publication to speak about the Immaculate, to bring human hearts to her, and, as a Knight of Mary, to intercede for souls who are lost and against the Church. Today, someone would say that he was a great manager since circulation of this magazine reached thousands in the following years. Maximilian was not interested in winning markets; he was a master of the spiritual life and this influenced everything he did. The source of his strength was not only his talent to manage the media but his deep internal relationship with God, his sanctity and a life dedicated to Mary. Father Maximilian soon established Niepokalanów – City of the Immaculate, his gift to the Immaculata.

This is how Niepokalanów was founded

Father Maximilian went to Grodno and founded another publishing house. From that time on, the “Militia of the Immaculate” became a catechetical writing and reached a wide circle of readers. When he realized that the place in the monastery of Grodno had become too small, Father Maximilian, with the permission of his superiors, began looking for a new place for the monastery. Prince Jan Drucki-Lubecki offered him a five hectares property in Teresin near Warsaw. On August 6, 1927, Father Maximilian Kolbe went to the location and placed the figure of the Immaculate there. With the help of dedicated confraters and

the local people, he built a chapel, wooden barracks and brought in printing machines. All this took place on November 21, 1927, the Feast of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary. This is how the famous Niepokalanów, the center of religious life and the apostolate of the press were founded.

On the Missions in Japan

Despite his poor health and advanced tuberculosis, at the end of February 1930 Father Maximilian and four other Franciscans went to Japan. They arrived in Nagasaki, a city with strong Christian traditions. They received permission from the local bishop to publish and build a monastery. However, Father Maximilian chose, to the surprise of many, a place difficult to access on the Hikosan mountain instead of the proposed district of Urakami, which was inhabited by nearly 15,000 Christians and which had the beautiful cathedral of the Virgin Mary. Father explained that he could not build the monastery at Urakami because a fireball would soon fall there destroying everything. Father Maximilian had foreknowledge of this historical event, in which the atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki on August 9, 1945. The bomb hit the most visible building, the cathedral of the Virgin Mary. Within a few minutes, 10,000 people were killed, and in subsequent days thousands more died from wounds and radiation effects. Meanwhile, in the Japanese Niepokalanów only windowpanes have been damaged. Yes, the Madonna of Nagasaki protected the Japanese Niepokalanów.

Despite extremely difficult conditions, Father Maximilian began his publishing work in Nagasaki. Three months later he opened a printing house. The first issue of the Japanese Knight of the Immaculate (Seibo no Kishi) was published and circulated 18 thousand copies; the third edition published 25,000 copies in December. In 1931 Maximilian imposed the Franciscan habit on the first Japanese Monk and gave him the name of Maria. The same year, he acquired a wild slope of the mountain where the Japanese Niepokalanów (Mugenzai no Sono - Immaculate Garden) was built, and in 1934 a new church was also dedicated there.

Times Without Mercy

After six years in his missions, Father Maximilian returned to his homeland. He was elected Superior of Niepokalanów in Poland, and his fame continued to grow. Since 1938, Niepokalanów had its own radio station in addition to the publishing house. The outbreak of World War II found Father Maximilian in a leading position of one of the largest monasteries and publishing houses in Poland and the world. At the time, the monastery had 700 monks and candidates; the community lived a very harsh and poor life. The war caused all activities to cease and the monks were sent home. On September 19, 1939, the Germans arrested Father Maximilian, along with forty other Franciscans. They were transported to the temporary camp in Lamsdorf (Łambinowice), and later to Amteitz (Gębice). When Father Maximilian was arrested the first time he said, to the monks “Courage, my sons. Don’t you see that we are leaving on a mission? This is part of the bargain and our good luck! The thing to do now is to pray unceasingly in order to win as many souls as possible. Let us then tell the Blessed Virgin that we are content, and that she can do with us anything she wishes”.



A month later, on December 8, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception of the Holy Mother, Father Maximilian and the Franciscans were released and returned to Niepokalanów. Father Maximilian prepared a place (refuge) at the monastery for about 3,000 displaced Poles from the Poznań province, of which approximately 2,000 were Jews. Unable to publish any writings, he organized along with his brothers, Perpetual Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. He also opened workshops for the public: a blacksmith shop, bicycle and clock repair shops, a photography department, a tailor's and shoemaker's workshops, a sanitary department, etc.

On February 17, 1941, the Gestapo returned to Niepokalanów. They arrested Fr. Maximilian along with four other brothers. This time, they took them to Pawiak a prison in Warsaw. Witnesses recalled that when the guard saw the friar in a habit with the rosary at his waist, he asked him if he believed in Christ. When Fr. Maximilian responded, "I believe," the guard repeatedly slapped him in the face. Fr. Maximilian was stripped from his habit and ordered to wear the prisoner's garment.

On May 28, 1941, Father Maximilian was transported to Auschwitz with other 303 prisoners. He was branded with the number 16670 and assigned to the unit under the supervision of "Bloody Krott", a well-known criminal. The prison commander said to Krott: "These men are layabouts and parasites. Put them to work." Krott forced the priests to cut and carry huge tree trunks. They labored all day without rest and were forced to run with heavy loads amidst constant and vicious blows from the guards. Fr. Maximilian accepted the work and the blows with surprising calm. Krott, holding relentless hatred against the Franciscan, gave him heavier tasks than to the others. Sometimes his colleagues would try to come to his aid but Father Maximilian would not let them expose themselves to danger. Always he replied, "Mary gives me strength. All will be well".

One day Krott found some of the heaviest planks he could lay hold of and personally loaded them on the Franciscan's back, ordering him to run. When Father Maximilian collapsed, Krott kicked him in the stomach and face and then ordered his men to give Father 50 lashes.

When the priest lost consciousness, Krott threw him in the mud and left him for dead, but his companions managed to smuggle him into the “Riviera”, the camp’s hospital. Despite his great suffering, Fr. Maximilian secretly heard confessions in the hospital and spoke of the love of God to the other inmates.

In Auschwitz, where hunger and hatred reigned and faith evaporated, Fr. Maximilian opened his heart to others and spoke of God’s infinite love. He seemed never to think about himself. When food was brought in and everyone struggled to get their place in the queue to make sure they got their share, Father stood aside, so, frequently there was no food left for him. At other times he shared his meager ration of soup or bread with others. When asked whether such self abnegation made sense in a place where every man was engaged in a struggle for survival, he answered: “Every man has a goal in life. For most men, it is to return home to their wives and families, or to their mothers. For me, I give my life for the good of all men.”

Men gathered in secret to hear Father Maximilian’s words of love and encouragement but it was his example that counted the most. Father Zygmunt Ruscak recalls: “Each time I saw Father Maximilian in the courtyard, I felt within myself an extraordinary effusion of his goodness. Although he wore the same ragged clothes as the rest of us, with the same tin can hanging from his belt, one forgot this wretched exterior and was conscious only of the charm of an inspired countenance and of his radiant holiness.”

On June 15, 1941 Father Maximilian was able to send a letter to his mother, in which he said: “Dear Mama, at the end of the month of May I was transferred to the camp of Auschwitz. Everything is well in my regard do not worry about me and about my health, because the good God is everywhere and provides for everything with love. It would be good that you do not write to me until you have received other news from me, because I do not know how long I will stay here. Cordial greetings and kisses, affectionately. Raymond.”

Little Raymond's Dream Fulfilled

Raymond's boyhood dream of martyrdom was about to be realized when at the end of July 1941, three prisoners escaped from the camp. One of the prisoners was from the block in which Father Maximilian was being held. The enraged SS-Hauptsturmführer Karl Fritsch, summoned the prisoners from the block to the assembly square and ordered them to choose ten men to be sentenced to death by starvation. When one of the selected men Franciszek Gajowniczek heard his name called, he cried out: "My wife! My children!" When Father Maximilian heard this, he volunteered to take Franciszek's place. The Nazi commander asked, "What does this Polish pig want?"

Father Maximilian replied: "**I am a Catholic priest from Poland**; I would like to take his place, because he has a wife and children".

Surprised, the commander accepted Father Maximilian in exchange for Gajowniczek. Gajowniczek later said: "I could only thank him with my eyes. I was stunned and could hardly grasp what was going on. The immensity of it: I, the condemned, am to live and someone else willingly and voluntarily offers his life for me, a stranger. Is this a dream? I was returned to my place without the chance to say anything to Father Maximilian Kolbe. I was saved. And I owe it to him the fact that I could tell you all this."

The news quickly spread throughout the camp. It was the first and only time such an incident occurred in the whole history of Auschwitz." Franciszek Gajowniczek would miraculously survive Auschwitz, and would later be present at Father Maximilian's beatification in 1971.

The men were led away to the underground bunker where they were to be starved to death. It is said that in the bunker, Father Maximilian would lead the men in prayer and sing hymns to Mary. When the guards checked the cell, Father Maximilian could be seen praying in the middle. Bruno Borgowiec, a Polish prisoner who was in charge of serving the prisoners, later gave a report of what he saw: "The ten condemned to death went through terrible days, but from the underground cell in which they were held,



continuously arose the echo of prayers and canticles. The man in charge of emptying the buckets of urine always found them empty. Thirst drove the prisoners to drink the contents. Since they had become very weak, prayers became only whispers. At every inspection, when almost all the others were now lying on the floor, Father Maximilian was seen kneeling or standing in the center as he looked cheerfully in the face of the SS men.

Father Maximilian never asked for anything and did not complain; rather, he encouraged the others saying that the fugitive might be found and then they would all be freed. One of the SS guards remarked: “this priest is really a great man. We have never seen anyone like him...”

After two weeks, all the prisoners, except Father Maximilian, had died due to dehydration and starvation. Because the guards wanted the cell emptied, Father Maximilian Maria Kolbe was executed with a lethal injection of phenol on August 14, 1941, the eve of the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Those present said that he calmly accepted death, lifting up his hands. The following day, August 15, 1941, the Feast of the Assumption, the body of Father Maximilian was burnt in the crematorium.

The deeds and courage of Maximilian Kolbe, known by the prisoners of Auschwitz, offered a rare glimpse of light and human dignity in the face of extreme cruelty. After the war, Father Maximilian Kolbe’s reputation grew and he became a symbol of courageous dignity.

Saint Maximilian and the Two Crowns of Glory

In the now famous vision of his youth, Our Lady offered Saint Maximilian two crowns: the white crown of a life of heroic virtue, and the red crown of martyrdom. He was rewarded with these two crowns for a life spent totally for the Immaculate. By Divine Providence, the Church has seen fit to confirm this gift given to a saint whose love knew no limits.

After returning to Poland in 1920, he wrote: “I must be a saint, the greatest saint possible.

Remember that you are the absolute, unconditional, unlimited, irrevocable property of the Immaculate... All the fruits of your activities depend on the union with her... My life (at every moment), my death (where, when and how) and my eternity are yours, O Immaculate. Do with me whatever you wish.”

Beatification: The “White Crown”

Saint Maximilian’s personal commitment and good example earned him the reputation of holiness. This aura of sanctity gleamed ever more brightly after his death in the concentration camp of Auschwitz. The Polish, Italian, German, Japanese and American press all testified to his heroism.

Cardinals and bishops, religious families and pontifical universities directed their supplications to Rome to begin the canonical process required for recognition of heroic virtue.

On October 17, 1971, in the Basilica of Saint Peter in Rome, in an event officiated by the Conventual Franciscans, Father Maximilian was inscribed into the register of the Blessed as Confessor of the Faith. Paul VI thus conferred upon the Polish Franciscan the “white crown” that Our Lady had promised him in the famous vision of his childhood; the “red crown” promised in the same vision was yet to be conferred.

The “Red Crown” and Canonization

Only a month after the beatification, the Postulator for his cause, Fr. Antonio Maria Ricciardi, expressed his conviction that Father Maximilian had died a martyr. Saint Maximilian had the greatest chance as anyone else of surviving. However, he preferred to imitate Christ by demonstrating the “greatest love” in laying down his life for his brethren. Father Maximilian accompanied prisoners condemned to death into the hunger bunker, arousing both confusion and admiration in the guards and the other prisoners. He loved to the end.

Finally, on October 10, 1982, Father Maximilian Maria Kolbe received the “red crown” when Saint Pope John Paul II canonized him. The Holy Father enrolled him among the martyrs, a wonderful surprise for those who knew the Saint who laid down his life as a “Catholic priest,” an *alter Christus*.

What does Father Maximilian’s Example say to us?

Father Maximilian lived 47 years and few months. Holy Father Saint Paul VI who personally beatified Fr. Maximilian, raised him to the glory of the altars on October 17, 1971 as a martyr of love, Holy Father Saint John Paul II canonized Fr. Maximilian Kolbe on October 10, 1982. Today we ask ourselves, how can we imitate Father Maximilian? What does he say to the modern man?

As a small child from Gold Street in Pabianice, Raymond Kolbe was strongly connected with his parents and siblings. The entire Kolbe family actively participated in the life of the parish community. Today, it helps us understand how important the family is; how irreplaceable the work of a father and a mother is in caring for the proper development of their children and the transfer of faith. It is the family and the community that shapes a man.

We are often so busy and absorbed in too many activities, worrying about material needs to the point that we don’t think about our life with God.

The evangelizing zeal of Father Maximilian, which yielded wonderful fruits from his work in Rome, Krakow, Grodno, Niepokalanów, Nagasaki, and Auschwitz, were borne out of his deep relationship with God and especially the Immaculate Mother. This is the secret of his holiness.

We live in times where digital technology has entered our everyday lives as a tool of a struggle between good and evil. The Internet often creates confusion in our hearts. We can compare it to a “tsunami of consciences”. Father Maximilian shows us that communication tools can and should be used to do good for God, to talk about Him and seek new paths to the lost

hearts of men. It is in the human heart that the choice of light or darkness can be made.

Today, the culture of death seems stronger than the culture of life. In many parts of the world, conceived life is not protected, people are not receiving medical care, the elderly are not being cared for. Persecution of Christians is increasing, including those hidden in work, on the streets (abandoned, homeless, orphans, women's trafficking), in advertisements, persuading the masses to live without morality and without God. Father Maximilian's testimony defended the great value of human life.

Our times have falsified the true meaning of love. How often we witness mankind's treatment of the other person as a thing that can be bought and/or manipulated for self-benefit. From Father Maximilian, we can learn Christian love and learn that people become a gift to each other, gift that is voluntary, unforced, rising out of a heart sensitive to the well-being of the neighbor. It is a sacrificial gift of life to save the gift of life. We are not all called to martyrdom, but in everyday life we can give our neighbor a merciful heart, a good word and offer our compassionate presence.

Conclusion

Maximilian did not die but “gave his life for his brother”

At the end of our journey let us go to the words of Saint John Paul II during the canonization of Saint Maximilian Kolbe.

Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends (John 15:13)

“Through the death which Christ underwent on the Cross, the redemption of the world was achieved, for this death has the value of supreme love. Through the death of Father Maximilian Kolbe, a shining sign of this love was renewed in our century which is so seriously and in so many ways threatened by sin and death”.

[...] Father Maximilian prepared himself for this definitive sacrifice by following Christ from the first years of his life in Poland. From these years came the mysterious vision of two crowns: one white and one red. From these our saint does not choose. He accepts them both. From the years of his youth, in fact, Maximilian was filled with the great love of Christ and the desire for martyrdom.

[...] The inspiration for Maximilian Kolbe's entire life was the "Immaculata". "To her he entrusted his love for Christ and his desire for martyrdom. In the mystery of the Immaculate Conception, there revealed itself before the eyes of his soul that marvelous and supernatural world of God's grace offered to man.

In this human death of his there was the clear witness borne to Christ: the witness borne in Christ to the dignity of man, to the sanctity of his life, and to the saving power of death in which the power of love is made manifest".

Precisely for this reason the death of Father Maximilian Kolbe became a sign of victory. This was a victory won over all systematic contempt and hate for man and for what is divine in man – a victory like that won by our Lord Jesus Christ on Calvary".



М. И. П. С. М.

*“Who then are You,
O Immaculate Conception?”*



Who then are you, O Immaculate Conception?

I am the Immaculate Conception

By St. Maximilian Kolbe

On February 17, 1941, just a few hours before his second and final arrest, Saint Maximilian Kolbe, wrote down his last reflections on the Immaculate Conception. The question, “Who are you, O Immaculate Conception?” occupied his priestly mind and heart forming him to be a living witness of the power of the Immaculate and to die as a living offering of love.

“IMMACULATE CONCEPTION”. These words fell from the lips of the Immaculata herself. Hence, they must tell us in the most precise and essential manner who she really is.

Since human words are incapable of expressing divine realities, it follows that these words: “Immaculate,” and “Conception” must be understood in a much more profound, much more beautiful and sublime meaning than usual: a meaning beyond that which human reason at its most penetrating, commonly gives to them.

St. Paul wrote, quoting the Prophet Isaiah: “What eye has not seen, and ear has not heard, and what has not entered the human heart, what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor. 2: 9). Here, these words apply fully. However, we can and should reverently inquire into the mystery of the Immaculata and try to express it with words provided by our intelligence using its own proper powers.

Who then are you, O Immaculate Conception?

Not God, of course, because he has no beginning. Not an angel, created directly out of nothing. Not Adam, formed out of the dust of the earth (Gen. 2: 7). Not Eve, molded from Adam’s rib (Gen. 2: 21). Not the Incarnate Word, who exists before all ages, and of whom we should use the word “conceived” rather than “conception”. Humans do not exist before their conception, so we might call them created “conceptions.” But you, O Mary, are different from all other children of Eve. They are conceptions

stained by original sin; whereas you are the unique, Immaculate Conception.

Everything which exists, outside of God himself, since it is from God and depends on him in every way, bears within itself some semblance to its Creator; there is nothing in any creature which does not betray this resemblance, because every created thing is an effect of the Primal Cause.

It is true that the words we use to speak of created realities express the divine perfections only in a halting, limited and analogical manner. They are only a more or less distant echo, as are the created realities that they signify, of the properties of God himself.

Would not “conception” be an exception to this rule? No; there is never any such exception.

The Father begets the Son; the Spirit proceeds from Father and Son. These few words sum up the mystery of life of the Most Blessed Trinity and of all the perfections in creatures which are nothing else but echoes, a hymn of praise, a many-hued tableau, of this primary and most wondrous of all mysteries.

We must perforce use our customary vocabulary, since it is all we have; but we must never forget that our vocabulary is very inadequate. Who is the Father? What is his personal life like? It consists in begetting, eternally; because he begets his Son from the beginning, and forever.

Who is the son? He is the Begotten-One because from the beginning and for all eternity he is begotten by the Father.

And who is the Holy Spirit? The flowering of the love of the Father and the Son. If the fruit of created love is a created conception, then the fruit of divine Love, that prototype of all created love, is necessarily a divine “conception.” The Holy Spirit is, therefore, the “uncreated, eternal conception,” the prototype of all the conceptions that multiply life throughout the whole universe.

The Father begets; the Son is begotten; the Spirit is the “conception” that springs from their love; there we have the intimate life of the three Persons by which they can be distinguished one from another. But they are united in the oneness of their Nature, of their divine existence.

The spirit is, then this thrice holy “conception,” this infinitely holy, Immaculate Conception.

Everywhere in this world we notice action, and the reaction which is equal but contrary to it; departure and return; going away and coming back; separation and reunion. The separation always looks forward to union, which is creative. All this is simply an image of the Blessed Trinity in the activity of creatures. Union means love, creative love. Divine activity, outside the Trinity itself, follows the same pattern. First, God creates the universe; that is something like a separation. Creatures, by following the natural law implanted in them by God, reach their perfection, become like him, and go back to him. Intelligent creatures love him in the conscious manner; through this love they unite themselves more and more closely with him, and so find their way back to him. The creature most completely filled with this love, filled with God himself, was the Immaculata, who never contracted the slightest stain of sin, who never departed in the least from God’s will. United to the Holy Spirit as his spouse, she is one with God in an incomparably more perfect way than can be predicated of any other creature.

What sort of union is this? It is above all an interior union, a union of her essence with the “essence” of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit dwells in her, lives in her. This was true from the first instant of her existence. It was always true; it will always be true.

In what does this life of the Spirit in Mary consist? He himself is uncreated Love in her; the Love of the Father and of the Son, the Love by which God loves himself, the very love of the Most Holy Trinity. He is a fruitful Love, a “Conception.” Among creatures made in God’s image the union brought about by married love is the most intimate of all (cf. Mt. 19, 6). In a much more precise, more interior, more essential manner, the Holy Spirit lives in the soul of the Immaculata, in the depths of her very being. He makes her fruitful, from the very first instant of her existence, all during her life, and for all eternity.

This eternal “Immaculate Conception” (which is the Holy Spirit) produces in an immaculate manner divine life itself in the

womb (or depths) of Mary's soul, making her the Immaculate Conception, the human Immaculate Conception.

And the virginal womb of Mary's body is kept sacred for him; there he conceives in time – because everything that is material occurs in time- the human life of the Man-God.

And so the return to God (which is love), that is to say the equal and contrary reaction, follows a different path from that found in creation. The path of creation goes from the Father through the Son by the Holy Spirit; this return trail goes from the Spirit through the Son back to the Father; in other words, by the Spirit the Son becomes incarnate in the Womb of the Immaculata; and through this Son love returns to the Father.

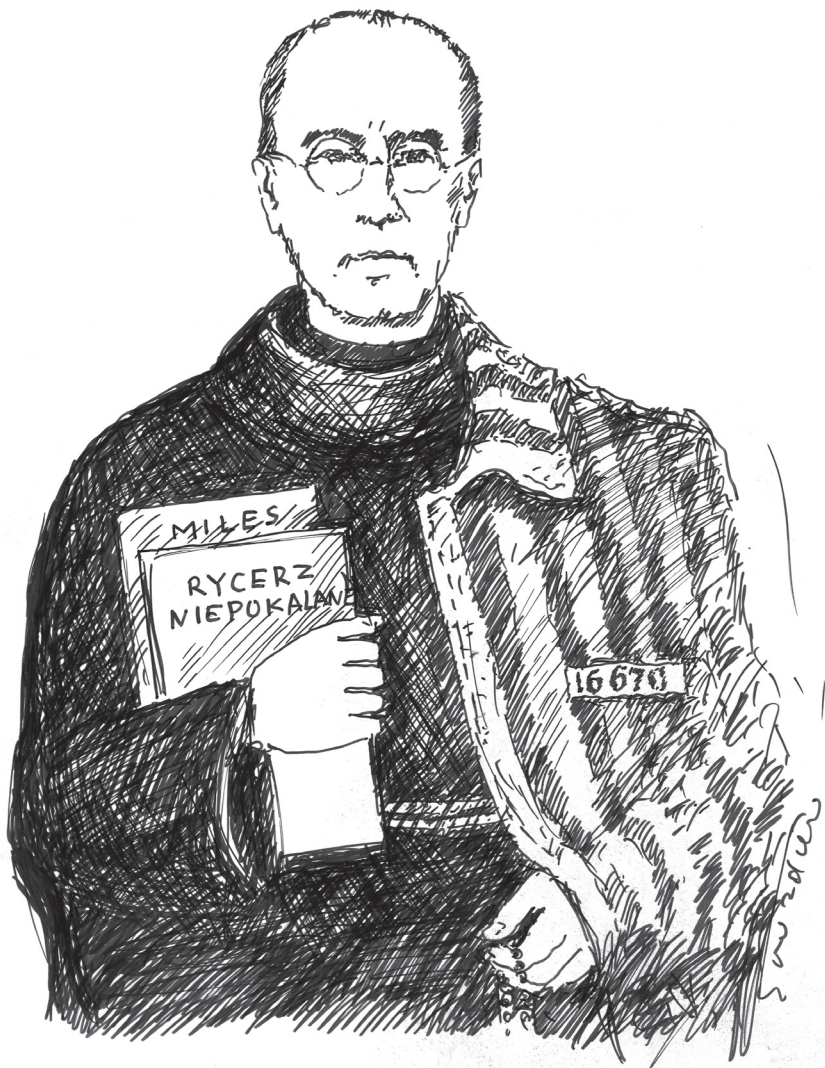
And she (the Immaculata), grafted into the Love of the Blessed Trinity, becomes from the first moment of her existence and forever thereafter the “complement of the Blessed Trinity”.

In the Holy Spirit's union with Mary we observe more than the love of two beings; in one there is all the love of the Blessed Trinity; in the other, all of creation's love. So it is that in this union heaven and earth are joined; all of heaven with all the earth, the totality of eternal love with the totality of created love. It is truly the summit of love.

At Lourdes, the Immaculata did not say of herself that she had been conceived immaculately, but, as St. Bernadette repeated, “Que soy era Immaculada Councepciou”: “I am the Immaculate Conception.”

If among human beings the wife takes the name of her husband because she belongs to him, is one with him, becomes equal to him and is, with him, the source of new life, with how much greater reason should the name of the Holy Spirit, who is the divine Immaculate Conception, be used as the name of her in whom he lives as uncreated Love, the principle of life in the whole supernatural order of grace?”

(Saint Maximilian Maria Kolbe, Feb. 17, 1941)



MILES

RYCERZ
NIEPOKALANE

16670

S. W. 2012

Solemn Act of Consecration

O Immaculate, Queen of Heaven and earth, refuge of sinners and our most loving Mother, God has willed to entrust the entire order of mercy to you. I, (*name*), a repentant sinner, cast myself at your feet, humbly imploring you to take me with all that I am and have, wholly to yourself as your possession and property. Please make of me, of all my powers of soul and body, of my whole life, death and eternity, whatever most pleases you.

If it pleases you, use all that I am and have without reserve, wholly to accomplish what was said of you: “She will crush your head,” and “You alone have destroyed all heresies in the whole world.” Let me be a fit instrument in your immaculate and merciful hands for introducing and increasing your glory to the maximum in all the many strayed and indifferent souls, and thus help extend as far as possible the blessed kingdom of the most Sacred Heart of Jesus. For wherever you enter, you obtain the grace of conversion and growth in holiness, since it is through your hands that all graces come to us from the most Sacred Heart of Jesus.

V. Allow me to praise you, O sacred Virgin

R. Give me strength against your enemies

Commentary by St. Maximilian Kolbe

This act of consecration consists of three parts:

1. an invocation;
2. a request that she may deign to accept us as her property;
3. a supplication that she may deign to make use of us to conquer other souls to her.

O Immaculata

We turn to her under this name, because she herself deigned to give us this name at Lourdes: the Immaculate Conception. God is immaculate, but God is not conceived. Angels are

immaculate, but there is no conception with them. The first parents were immaculate before sinning, but neither were they conceived. Jesus was immaculate and conceived, but He was not a conception, for as God He already existed before and to Him also applied the words of the name of God as revealed to Moses: "I am Who am, Who always is and does not begin to be." Other people are conceptions, but stained. She alone is not only conceived, but also a Conception and an Immaculate one.

This name conceals many more mysteries, which will be revealed in time. Thus, it indicates that the Immaculate Conception belongs in a certain sense to the essence of the Immaculata. This name must be dear to her, because it signifies the first grace she received in the first moment of her existence. The first gift is always the dearest one. This name, then, is fulfilled throughout her whole life, because she was always unspotted. Hence, she was also full of grace and God was with her [cf. Lk 1:28] always and even to the degree that she became the Mother of the Son of God.

Queen of heaven and earth

In a family, loving parents fulfill the wishes of the children as much as they are able, insofar as they are not harmful for them. So much more does God, the Creator and Prototype of earthly parents, desire to fulfill the will of His creatures, insofar as it is not harmful for them; that is, insofar as it is conformable with His will. The Immaculata did not bend away from the will of God in anything. In all things she loved the will of God, loved God. Hence, rightly she is called the "Suppliant Omnipotence." She has influence upon God Himself, on the entire world; she is the Queen of Heaven and Earth. In heaven, everyone acknowledges her sovereignty of love. However, that group of the first angels that did not want to acknowledge her regality lost its place in heaven.

She is queen also of earth because she is the Mother of God himself, but she both desires and has a right to be acknowledged freely by every heart and to be loved as the Queen of every heart. In this way, through her, that heart may be purified ever more, may become immaculate, similar to her heart and ever more

worthy of union with God, with the love of God, with the most Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Refuge of sinners

God is merciful, infinitely merciful, and nevertheless just and infinitely just. He cannot bear the least sin and must demand full reparation for it. The dispenser of the most precious Blood of Jesus, which has an infinite value and washes away these sins, is Divine Mercy personified in the Immaculata

Therefore, rightly, we invoke her “Refuge of sinners,” of great sinners, even if their sins be the most serious and numerous possible, even if they think that never again they would deserve mercy. Indeed, every cleansing of the soul is for her a new confirmation of her title of “Immaculate Conception.” The more deeply the soul is plunged into sin, the more the power of her immaculateness does show itself, in making such a soul pure as snow.

Our most loving Mother

The Immaculata is the Mother of our entire supernatural life because she is the Mediatrix of all graces, indeed, the Mother of divine grace, hence, our Mother in the sphere of grace, in the supernatural sphere. Moreover, she is a most loving mother, because you do not have any mother so affectionate, so loving, so “of God” like the Immaculata, wholly divine.

God has willed to entrust the entire order of mercy to you

In a family, the father is glad at times that the mother holds his punishing hand over the child by her intercession, because, in this case, justice is satisfied and mercy is shown. Not without cause is justice suspended. Similarly, God, in order not to punish us, gives us a spiritual mother, whose intercession he never opposes. Hence, the saints claim that Jesus reserved for himself the order of justice, giving to the Immaculata the whole order of his mercy.

In the second part of the act of consecration we say:

I, a repentant sinner

We here admit that we are not as she, immaculate, but sinful. What is more none of us can say that he has passed even a single day committing no sin, but feels himself guilty of much infidelity. We also say “unworthy,” because truly between an immaculate being and one soiled by sin there is in some sense an infinite difference. Therefore, in all truth, we acknowledge ourselves unworthy to turn to her, to pray to her, to fall at her feet, in order not to become similar to the proud Lucifer.

Hence, we also say,

Cast myself at your feet, humbly imploring you to take me with all that I am and have, wholly to yourself as your possession and property

By these words we beg, we beseech the Immaculata to accept us. We offer ourselves to her entirely, in every respect, as her children, as slaves of love, as servants, as instruments, and under every single aspect, under every title that anyone at any time might be able to express. We offer ourselves as her possession and property at her complete disposal, so that she may use us, and even use us up completely.

Make of me, of all my powers of soul and body, of my whole life, death and eternity, whatever most pleases you

At this point, to her we give our whole being, all the faculties of our soul; that is, intellect, memory, and will, and all the faculties of the body—therefore, all the senses and each in particular, our strength, health or sickness. We offer her our entire life with all its events, pleasant, unpleasant or indifferent. We give her our death, whenever and wherever and in whatever way it befalls us. We give her even our whole eternity. Actually, we have the firm hope that in paradise only we will be able to belong to her in an incomparably more perfect manner. In this way, we express a desire and an entreaty that she may allow us to become hers under every aspect more and more perfectly.

In the third part we pray:

Use all that I am and have without reserve wholly to accomplish what was said of you: “She will crush your head,” and, “You alone have destroyed all the heresies in the whole world.”

On the statues and pictures of the Immaculata, we always see a serpent at her feet, surrounding the globe of the earth, as she crushes its head with her foot. Satan, soiled by sin, endeavors to soil all souls on earth. He hates her who was always unspotted. He lie in wait for her heel in the persons of her children; however, in the fight against her, she crushes always his head in every soul who has recourse to her. We ask her to use us, if she wishes, as an instrument to crush the head of the proud head of the serpent in unfortunate souls. Holy Scripture adds, quoting the verse mentioned above, “and you shall lie in wait for her heel.” The evil spirit really lies in wait in a special way for those who consecrate themselves to the Immaculata, because he desires to insult her at least in them. His endeavor against sincerely dedicated souls always ends with his more shameful defeat; hence, his impotent fury becomes all the more violent.

The words, “You alone have destroyed all heresies in the world,” are taken from the prayers that the Church orders her priests to say to her. The Church speaks of “heresies” and not of the “heretics,” for she, Mary, loves them, and because of this love desires to free them from the error of heresy. The Church says “all,” without any exception; “alone,” since “she” alone suffices. God, in fact, belongs to her with all the treasures of grace; that is, graces of the conversion and sanctification of souls. “In the whole world” means that no corner of the earth is excluded. In this act of consecration, we beg her to use us to destroy the whole serpent, representing the various heresies, which keep the world entangled.

Let me be a fit instrument in your immaculate and merciful hands for introducing and increasing your glory to the maximum in all the many strayed and indifferent souls.

All over the world, we see unhappy, erring souls, who do not even know their purpose in life. They love all kinds of earthly goods

instead of the one good, namely, God. Many, too, are indifferent to the highest love. We desire the “implanting and developing... in a most eminent degree the glory” of the Immaculata in those souls. We beg her to make us useful instruments in her immaculate and most merciful hands and that she would not allow us to oppose her; we ask her that she may even constrain us, should we not want to listen to her.

And thus help extend as far as possible the blessed kingdom of the most Sacred Heart of Jesus

The most Sacred Heart of Jesus is the love of God toward men. His kingdom is the reign of love in the hearts of men, which Jesus manifested in the crib, throughout His life, on the cross and in the Eucharist, when He gave His Mother as mother to us. Moreover, He desires to enkindle this love in human hearts. The implanting and developing of the honor of the Immaculata and the winning of souls for Her is the winning of souls for Jesus’ Mother, who will carry the kingdom of Jesus into souls.

For wherever you enter, there you obtain the grace of conversion and growth in holiness, since it is through your hands that all graces come to us from the most Sacred Heart of Jesus

The Immaculata is the “Suppliant Omnipotence.” Every conversion and sanctification is the work of grace, and she is the Mediatrix of all graces. Therefore, she alone suffices for obtaining and distributing all graces, any grace. During the apparition of the Miraculous Medal, St. Catherine Labouré saw rays streaming from the precious rings on the fingers of the Immaculata.

They represent graces that the Immaculata liberally bestows upon everyone who desires them. Alphonse Ratisbonne speaks similarly about the rays of grace, as he recounts his vision.

Allow me to praise you, O Sacred Virgin! Give me strength against your enemies.

When Duns Scotus, a Franciscan, went to Paris for a dispute in which he was to defend the privilege of the Immaculate Conception at the University of the Sorbonne, he passed by

a statue of the Blessed Mother and prayed to her with the above-mentioned words. As tradition has it, the Blessed Mother bowed her head as a sign of confirmation.

In the first part of this petition, Duns Scotus turns humbly to the Mother of God and asks that she permit him to praise her. Acknowledging his great unworthiness for such a sublime work as praising the Blessed Mother, he likewise acknowledges that such a grace depends upon her, and it is enough that she permit him, and his efforts will be crowned with success.

The second part is strong, unwavering, and brave. He asks for strength to overcome the serpent, to be an instrument in her hand.

Who is her enemy? Whatever is stained, whatever does not lead to God, whatever is not love, whatever comes from the hellish serpent which is lie personified; hence, it includes all our defects, or all our faults. We beg her to give us strength against them. For this one purpose all devotions exist, all prayers, the holy sacraments: that we receive power to overcome all obstacles on our journeying toward God in a more and more ardent love, in assimilating ourselves to God, in uniting with God himself.

Just as we have come from God through creation, so also we return to God. All nature tells us this. Wherever we glance, for each action we see a corresponding reaction, equal and opposite, which is an echo of God's operation and of activity in creation as well. On the return road of reaction, a creature, endowed with free will, meets with difficulties and oppositions, and God permits these trials in order to strengthen even more the energy with which this creature strives toward Him.

In order to obtain sufficient strength for it, a creature must pray, must ask for that strength from Him, Who is the source of all strength and Who looks upon the efforts of His creature with love and desires that he comes sincerely to Him; actually, He does not stint his aid. Even if that creature, that dear child of His, stumbles on the way, falls, soils and wounds itself, this merciful Father cannot look upon its misfortune. He sends down his only begotten Son, Who by His life and teaching points out to His fallen creature a bright and sure road. By his Sacred Blood, of infinite value, He washes away the dirt and heals the wounds.

So that the soul from fear of the violated justice of God would not lose hope, God sends the personification of His very love, the Spouse of the Spirit, full of motherly love, the Immaculata, all beautiful, without stain, though a daughter of men, sister of human beings. He entrusts her with the generous distributing of His entire mercy towards souls. He constitutes her the Mediatrix of grace earned by her Son. He makes her the Mother of grace, the Mother of souls reborn of grace, souls regenerated, and continually being reborn into an always more perfect divinization.

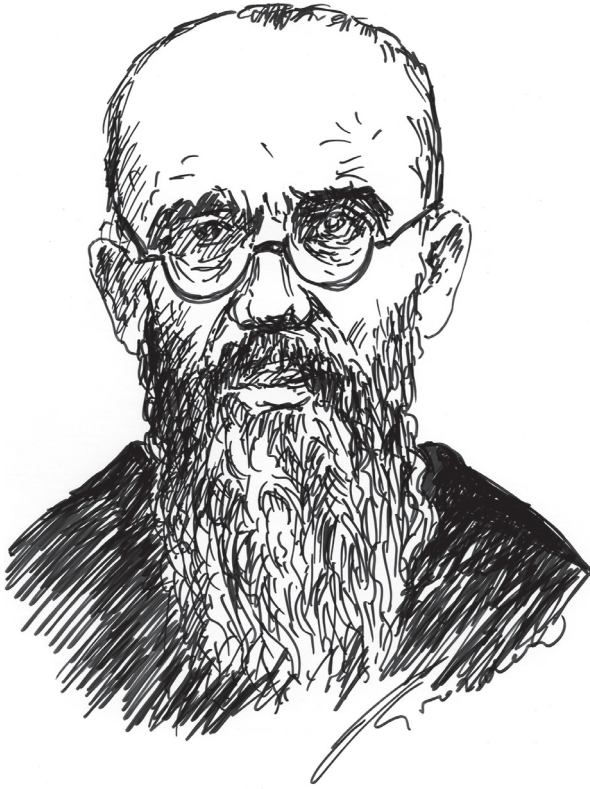
Will to Love, Writings of St. Maximilian Kolbe, For a Book, #1331.

TOTALLY YOURS

*Prayer composed by St. Maximilian Kolbe and recited
by Saint John Paul II*

Immaculate Conception, Mary, my Mother.
Live in me. Act in me. Speak in and through me.
Think your thoughts in my mind. Love, through my heart.
Give me your dispositions and feelings.
Teach, lead and guide me to Jesus.
Correct, enlighten and expand my thoughts and behavior.
Possess my soul. Take over my entire personality and life.
Replace it with yourself.
Incline me to constant adoration and thanksgiving.
Pray in me and through me.
Let me live in you and keep me in this union always.





“I am a Catholic Priest”

*Father Maximilian Kolbe’s
Reply to Priests
Who Question Their
Own Identity*

“I am a Catholic Priest”

“I am a Catholic priest.” With this statement, we have in just a few words the “ID card” of St. Maximilian Kolbe, a Polish Franciscan priest martyred in Auschwitz on August 14, 1941. When the fierce Lagerführer Karl Fritzsch, in reprisal for the escape of a prisoner, chose ten prisoners and condemned them to death by starvation and dehydration in the death bunker, “number 16670,” Fr. Maximilian M. Kolbe, was not among them. When one of the condemned, Sergeant Francis Gajowniczek, cried out, “My poor wife and my poor children,” Fr. Kolbe, driven by the supernatural force of charity, stepped out of the ranks and, before the astonished eyes of the Commandant, presented himself, saying, “I want to die in his place.”

It was a miracle that Commandant Fritzsch did not shoot him dead on the spot. He asked with scorn, “Who are you?” and Fr. Kolbe very calmly and firmly said, “I am a Catholic priest.”

This reply is truly his ID card, and you could even say “Catholic priest” was his true first and last name. Saint Maximilian surely could have replied, “I am Maximilian Kolbe,” or “I am a Franciscan friar,” or even, “I am the leader of a large religious community.” Instead, he responded with the most noble and sacred title, written in the depths of his soul in an indelible sacramental character, the character of Holy Orders: “I am a Catholic priest.”

You can understand right away that, as soon as St. Maximilian showed his “ID card” as a Catholic priest, offering himself as a sacrificial victim in another’s place, immediately Commandant Fritzsch accepted the exchange, thinking cynically to himself, “Good! That will be one less priest!”

Priest and victim of the Shoah: is this not true priesthood? Is it not Jesus’ priesthood? “Sacerdos tuae Victimae.” A devout author once marvelously wrote, “Victima tui sacerdotii” – (“[sacrificial] victim of your priesthood”), for Jesus was both priest and victim. It is a wonderful summary of the essence and mission of priesthood. Jesus, the Supreme and Eternal High Priest, made it clear that there can be no separation between the priest and the victim. Every priest is authentic inasmuch as he is a victim in imitation of Jesus the priest.

Catholic priest and sacrificial victim: you could say that these two phrases are like the systole and diastole of a priestly heart. They express two realities that relate by osmosis and symbiosis, and which are one in the divine reality of the priesthood of Christ in which every priest participates.

At Auschwitz, this is just how St. Maximilian Kolbe appears: a priest like Jesus the priest, the priest and victim; he was a priest and martyr, a priest immolated like a lamb, offering himself as a total sacrifice in the hands of these new Pharisees and high priests of the bloodthirsty power that the Nazis were. Just like Jesus Crucified, St. Maximilian too, to save a brother, voluntarily offered himself as a holocaust: “oblatus est quia ipse voluit”

“Though harshly treated, he submitted and did not open his mouth; Like a lamb led to slaughter or a sheep silent before shearers, he did not open his mouth. (Isaiah 53:7)

Priestly Role & Identity

*By His Eminence Timothy Dolan
Archdiocese Of New York USA*

Most of you know the inspirational story of St. Maximilian Kolbe, but I trust that you, like me, never tire of hearing it. Recall that fateful day at Auschwitz when the Nazi prison guards assembled the concentration camp inmates in rows, and, at the commandant's order, randomly chose ten helpless men for execution in retaliation for a recent escape. Remember how one of those chosen, a husband and father. Picture the stillness when Father Kolbe spoke up, “I wish to take the place of that man.”

Imagine the sneer of the commandant as he asked. “Who is that Polish swine?” And recall again the reply of Maximilian Kolbe: “I am a Catholic priest”.

“Who are you?” snickered the commandant!

Father Kolbe did not reply:

- I am Maximilian Kolbe ...
- I am a Pole ...
- I am a human being ...
- I am a friend of his ...

His response was simply and humbly: “I am a Catholic priest.” In the eyes of God, in his own eyes, in the eyes of God’s Church and his suffering people, Maximilian Kolbe’s identity was that of a priest. At the core of his being, on his heart, was engraved a nametag, which marked him forever a priest of God. That identity could not be erased by the inhuman circumstances of a death camp, or the godless environment of Auschwitz, or by the fact that Father Kolbe was hardly “doing” the things one usually associates with priestly ministry, or that the people around him had mostly lost any faith or recognition of the supernatural they may have had before they entered that hell hole.

That identity hardly depended upon the acclaim of those around him or was lessened by the doubts and he may personally have experienced in such a tortured setting. That identity came from God, and was imbedded indelibly within, born of a call he had detected early on from the Master to follow him, and sealed forever by the Sacrament of Holy Orders. So conscious was he of his priestly identity that he could boldly answer the sneer of the Nazi commandant and simply state what he knows to be the central fact of his personal definition, “I am a Catholic priest.”

“The priest” “we read in the Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*) from the Second Vatican Council, “shares in the authority by which Christ himself builds up, sanctifies, and rules his Body. Therefore ... the sacerdotal office ... is conferred by that special sacrament through which priests, by the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are marked with a special character and are so configured to Christ the Priest that they can act in the person of Christ the Head” (No. 2).

The priesthood is a call, not a career; a redefinition of self, not just a new ministry; a way of life, not a job; a state of being, not just a function; a permanent, lifelong commitment, not a temporary style of service; an identity, not just a role.

We are priests; yes, the doing, the ministry, is mighty important, but it flows from the being; we can act as priests, minister as priests, function as priests, serve as priests, preach as priests, because first and foremost we are priests! Being before act! *Agere sequitur esse*, as the Scholastics expressed it. Father William Byron, the former president of The Catholic University of America, is fond of saying that “we are human beings, not human doings, and our basic dignity and identity comes from who we are, not what we do.” This is true as well of the priesthood.

Timothy Dolan

Introduction to “Priests for the Third Millennium”, written when he was Rector of the North American College in Rome

The Beatification of Fr. Maximilian Maria Kolbe

*Homily of Pope Paul VI
October 17, 1971*

Maximilian Kolbe is called “Blessed.” What does this title mean? It means that the Church recognizes him as an exceptional figure, a man in whom the grace of God and his own soul have so come together as to produce a stupendous life. Whoever examines his life carefully, discovers this close union of the divine and the human operating as a dual principle. One is mysterious, the other can be experienced; one is transcendent but interior, the other natural but complex and expanded, so that it reaches that extraordinary image of the moral and spiritual greatness we call holiness; that is perfection in the religious sphere, a sphere that soars towards the infinite heights of the Absolute, as you know. The title “Blessed” therefore means a person is worthy

of that formal religious veneration permitted in the places and among the groups with whom he was associated, a veneration that implies admiration of the person receiving it because of the unusual and magnificent way he reflects the sanctifying Spirit. This title means the person is saved and glorious. It means he is a citizen of heaven with all the particular marks that identify a citizen of earth. It means he is a brother and friend who we know is still one of us, now more than ever, because now he is identified as an active member of the Communion of Saints, which is that mystical body of Christ, the Church, which lives both in time and in eternity.

This title means that he is our intercessor therefore, and our protector in the kingdom of charity, together with Christ “who lives forever to make intercession for us” (Heb 7:25; cfr. Rom 8:34). It means, finally, that he is a prize exemplar, the type of person on whom we can base our way of life, since as a “Blessed” he has the privilege of saying to the Christian people with the apostle Paul: “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Cor 4:16; 11:1, Phil 3:17; cfr. 1 Tess 3:7).

The Life of the New Blessed

In this way, then, from this day on, we can look up to Maximilian Kolbe, our new Blessed.

Who is Maximilian Kolbe? You know the answer; you know him well. So close is he to our generation, to the happenings we have all experienced in our time, that we all know about him. Few other processes of beatification have been conducted amidst such a wealth of information. Solely because we wish to show ourselves concerned with historical truth today, we shall present first of all a biographical sketch of Father Kolbe, written by someone who has studied him very carefully.

Father Maximilian Kolbe was born at Zdunska Wola, near Lodz, on January 8, 1894. In 1907 he entered the seminary of the Friars Minor Conventual, and later was sent to Rome where he continued his ecclesiastical studies at the Pontifical Gregorian University and at the Franciscan Seraphicum. While still a student he founded the Militia Immaculatae. After his ordination on April 28, 1918, he returned to Poland and initiated

his Marian apostolate, launching a monthly review *The Knight of the Immaculata*, which by 1938 reached a circulation of nearly a million.

In 1927 he founded Niepokalanow, “the City of the Immaculata,” a center for religious life and for various types of apostolate. In 1930 he set out for Japan, where he established a similar center. After returning permanently to Poland, he dedicated himself entirely to the task of publishing various religious periodicals. The second World War found him at the head of the biggest publishing enterprise in Poland. On September 19, 1939, he was arrested by the Gestapo and deported first to Lamdorf, Germany, and then to the concentration camp of Amtitz. Released on December 8, 1939, he returned to Niepokalanow, and took up anew his interrupted activities. Arrested again in 1941, he was incarcerated in the prison of Pawiak, at Warsaw, then sent off to the concentration camp at Oswiecim (Auschwitz). Having offered to take the place of an unknown fellow prisoner who had been condemned to death in reprisal for the escape of another prisoner, he was consigned to a bunker to die of starvation.

On August 14, 1941 he was put to death by being given an injection of poison. It was the eve of the Assumption. Thus, did he yield up his beautiful soul to God, after having helped and consoled his fellow sufferers. His body, like theirs, was burnt. (Fr. Ernesto Piacentini, OFM CONV.)

His Veneration of the Immaculate Conception

Maximilian Kolbe was an apostle of the formal veneration of Mary seen in all her pristine splendor, in the original and privileged character of the definition she gave of herself at Lourdes: The Immaculate Conception. It is impossible to separate the name of Father Kolbe, his activity or his mission, from the name of Mary Immaculate. He founded the Militia Immaculatae here in Rome before he was even a priest on October 16, 1917; today we may celebrate the anniversary of that occasion. We all know how this humble, meek Franciscan, with incredible courage and extraordinary talent for organization, developed his initiative, and made the devotion to the Mother of Christ, the Woman clothed with the sun, the center of his spirituality, his apostolate

and his theology. Let us not be reluctant to admire him, to adopt the watchword which the new Blessed leaves us as his legacy, as though we feared that such zeal to honor Mary might clash with the other two theological and spiritual currents so prominent in today's religious thought and life: the Christological trend, and the ecclesiological trend. No competition here! In Father Kolbe's mind, Christ occupies not merely the first place, but strictly speaking, the only place necessary and sufficient for salvation. Nor is love for the Church and for her mission absent from the teaching or the apostolic endeavors of our new Blessed. For it is precisely from the way Mary completes and serves the universal plan of Christ for the salvation of all men that she draws all her prerogatives and all her greatness.

All this we know very well. Father Kolbe, in total accord with the teaching, the liturgy and the spirituality of the Church, sees Mary as part of the divine plan. In this vision she is the "boundary fixed by eternal counsel," the woman who is "full of grace," the seat of wisdom, the one predestined to be Mother of Christ and queen of the messianic kingdom. At the same time, she is the handmaid of the Lord, the woman chosen to offer for the Incarnation of the Word her irreplaceable cooperation, the Mother of the God-man, our Savior. "Mary is the one by whom men reach Jesus, and the one by whom Jesus comes down to men" (*L. Bouyer, Le Trone de la Sagesse*, p. 69).

We must not, then, reproach either the new Blessed or the Church with excessive enthusiasm for the formal religious veneration of Mary. This enthusiasm will never be too great, considering the merits and benefits such veneration provides, precisely because of the mystery of Mary's communion with Christ, expressed so poignantly in the New Testament. No need to fear that it will develop into some sort of "Mariolatry"; for just as the sun will never be out-shone by the moon, neither will the mission of salvation confided to the Church ever be threatened because the Church honors Mary as her exceptional daughter and her spiritual mother. The characteristic aspect of the devotion, of the "hyperdulia" paid by Father Kolbe to Mary (an aspect which is not at all original with him), lies in the importance which, faced with the pressing needs of the Church today, he attaches

to her prophecy about the glory of the Lord and the exaltation of the humble, to the power of her intercession, to her marvelous example, to the reality of her maternal love. The Council has confirmed our certitude in regard to all this; and today from high heaven Father Kolbe instructs us and helps us to meditate on all these truths, and to live by them.

This Marian aspect of the sanctity of the new Blessed ranks him among the greatest saints and the far-seeing visionaries who understood, venerated and sang of the mystery of Mary.

A Ray of Light in a Somber Page of History

Let us now speak of the tragic yet sublime conclusion of Maximilian Kolbe's innocent and zealous life. It is this mainly which leads the Church on this day to honor this humble, gentle, religious man, this active and exemplary son of St. Francis, this knight of the Immaculata. His death is so horrible, so soul-shattering, that we would prefer not to speak of it, never to have to think of it again, so as not to remind Ourselves of the depths to which human vileness can sink when men consider it a sign of superiority and a cause for boasting to show icy cruelty towards defenseless human beings reduced to a state worse than slavery, destined for liquidation! How many millions were thus sacrificed to pride of power and racist folly! Yet we must remind ourselves of these somber facts in order to discern among them, here and there, some few traces of human feeling. History, alas! can never forget this frightful page; but in the midst of so much horror she cannot fail to point out to the rays of light which contrast all the more strongly with the surrounding darkness, even while they vanquish it. One of these rays of light, perhaps the most luminous, we see in the emaciated yet tranquil face of Maximilian Kolbe, this hero who never lost his paradoxical, yet well-justified confidence. His name can never perish; he serves as a reminder of the well-springs of moral courage that could still be found among these wretched men, a prey to terror and despair. In this dreadful antechamber of death, a divine and imperishable word of life echoes - the word spoken by Jesus revealing to us the secret of why the innocent suffer; it led him to expiate, to be a victim, a sacrifice of love. "Greater love than this no man hath, that a man

lay down his life for his friends” (Jn 15:13). Jesus was speaking of himself, a few hours before he sacrificed himself for man’s salvation. All men are Jesus’ friends if they listen to his word. In the terrible death camp of Auschwitz Father Kolbe exemplified this redemptive love in two ways.

Father Kolbe’s Lesson to Us in the Midst of Today’s Questioning of the Priesthood

Which of us does not remember this extraordinary story? “I am a Catholic priest,” he said, when he offered himself to die in another man’s place, knowing what kind of death it would be! He replaced one of his companions in misery who was unknown to him, and who had already been picked out for the blind act of revenge. What a magnificent moment! His offer was accepted. It rose from a heart so long accustomed to self-sacrifice that it had become natural and spontaneous to him, a logical consequence of his priesthood. For is the priest not another Christ? Was not Christ both the Priest and the Victim who redeemed the human race? What a glory it is for us priests, and what a lesson, to find in Blessed Maximilian such a splendid exemplification of our consecration and of our mission! What a warning he addresses to us in this hour of uncertainty, when at times human nature would like to assert its claims to the detriment of our supernatural vocation which calls us to the total offering of ourselves to Christ, which demands that we follow him! What a consolation it must be for all good and faithful priests and religious, so dear to Our heart, who, filled with the legitimate and praiseworthy desire to transcend personal mediocrity and social frustration, understand their mission just as he did. “I am a Catholic priest”—and for this reason I offer my life to save those of others. Such would seem to be the watchword which the new Blessed leaves especially to us, ministers of God’s Church, and likewise to all those who accept his spirit.

A Son of the Noble Polish Nation

To this priestly aspect we can add another, which shows the deep affection that motivated Blessed Maximilian’s sacrifice: he was a true Pole. Because of this he was condemned to

the concentration camp; and as a Polish patriot he was willing to give up his life for that of a fellow countryman, Francis Gajowniczek. How much is suggested by this human social and ethnic aspect of the freely-chosen death of Maximilian Kolbe, a son of the noble, Catholic, Polish nation! It seems to us that this heroic act of his exemplifies in typical fashion the historic destiny of his nation; for suffering is the centuries-old vocation of the Polish people. It has learned how to find in the trials that afflict its national life the consciousness of its unity; its chivalrous mission to achieve liberty through the pride of its sons' and daughters' spontaneous sacrifice, and their readiness to give themselves for each other as they rise above their vivacity in unconquered concord; its indelible Catholic character which makes of it a living and suffering member of the universal Church; its firm conviction that the secret of its restoration will be found in Mary's marvelous protection. These rays of light issuing from the new Polish martyr show us the true visage of his country. Let us ask this typical Polish hero to give us his firmness in the faith, his ardor in charity, the blessings of concord, prosperity and peace to all his people. The Church and the whole world will rejoice over it together!



Pope Paul VI with Cardinal Karol Wojtyła and Franciszek Gajowniczek

Saint John Paul II Addresses Concerning Saint Maximilian

October 14, 1971

Press Conference of Cardinal Karol Wojtyla

Cardinal Karol Wojtyla, Archbishop of Cracow (and later Pope John Paul II), in whose diocese the death-camp of Auschwitz (Oswiecim) was located, made the following presentation on October 14, 1971, at the Holy See's press office. He introduced to the reporters this priest, Father Maximilian Kolbe, who followed Jesus Christ "all the way," and after whose death the extermination camp at Auschwitz lost some of its hellish character.

Maximilian Kolbe, a Franciscan Religious, has aroused the attention of the entire world by the sacrifice of his life, which he lovingly offered in favor of an unknown fellow prisoner, the father of a family, who had been picked out, along with nine other prisoners, to die of hunger and thirst in reprisal for the escape of another prisoner. This man, named Gajowniczek, is in Rome today and will be present at the glorification of the man thanks to whom he succeeded in surviving the hell of the concentration camp.

Barely thirty years separate us from that day, the eve of the Assumption in 1941, on which Father Maximilian Kolbe, the last survivor of the condemned group, was finally killed by a lethal injection of phenol. Like those of millions of other victims his body was consigned for cremation to one of the ovens which, at Auschwitz, burned day and night. Thus, was his wish fulfilled, a longing he had so often expressed: "I would like for my ashes to be dispersed to the four winds..." Little did he imagine that his desire would be so literally fulfilled; but neither did he foresee that, far from making him disappear "without a trace," his humble desire would draw down on him the attention of the whole Church. Rarely has there appeared such unanimity concerning a person's reputation for sanctity.

Father Maximilian Kolbe's Reply to Priests Who Question Their Own Identity

With growing insistence, the question arises: "Why Father Kolbe?" Were there not in these death camps other prisoners who bore witness of their love for their fellow men, even to a heroic degree? One thinks of the Polish Bishop Michal Kozal, who literally let himself starve to death because he gave away to his unfortunate companions all his own meagre rations. If we observe the signs of the times, what, we may ask, does the Church mean to tell us by proposing this priest to us today as a model?

Note this well: this 47 years old man who had fulfilled with such exemplary fidelity the ideal of St. Francis, wished to die AS A PRIEST. When Fritzsich, the brutal camp commandant, taken aback by the courage of this prisoner who offered to replace a man condemned to die, asked him: "Who are you?" Maximilian Kolbe simply replied: "A Catholic priest."

So, it was as a priest that he accompanied the group of nine miserable men condemned to perish. For his task was not merely to save the tenth one; he had to help the nine others die as Christians. As soon as the fatal door clanged shut behind the condemned men, he took charge of them all; and not of them only, but also of all the others dying of hunger in the neighboring bunkers, whose animal-like howls struck terror in the hearts of all who heard them.

From the moment Father Kolbe appeared in their midst these wretches felt that they had a protector and helper; and the cells in which they awaited the inexorable denouement thenceforth reechoed with prayers and hymns. The jailers themselves were unnerved by it. "So was haben wir nie gesehen!" ("We have never seen the like!") they exclaimed. We shall never know, till judgment day, whether among them there were any "good thieves," converted perhaps at their last hour, by this heroic example they had witnessed. The fact is, and all the survivors of Auschwitz know it, that from Assumption day 1941 on, the camp became a somewhat less hellish place.

At a time when so many priests, all over the world, question their identity as priests, Maximilian Kolbe stands before them to give his answer, not with fine-spun theological disquisitions,

but with the testimony of his life and of his death. It was enough for him to be like his Master, by bearing witness to a “greater love,” the evangelical test that shows now that surely belongs to Christ. Heroism like his is certainly not within the grasp of everyone; but to give up striving for it would spell failure indeed. The answers to the questions that assail us and cause us anguish may well be found in an effort to “go up higher,” and we can be sure that grace will provide what nature by itself cannot attain.

In the Hellish Circle of Hatred

Father Maximilian died in an era characterized by man’s fury and scorn for man, in which man was cut down to the level of a robot, a state worse than slavery. The ghastly memory of hell that every concentration camp was is fading little by little, today’s young people hardly know anything about it; and history books record facts which the imagination has a hard time picturing. Still, those who survived this period know how horribly, under a totalitarian regime, the human person was degraded, humiliated, despised. In this poisoned soil nothing but hatred could grow. One prisoner wrote: “Ah! how I hate them all! They have taught me how to hate.”

Now, the unheard-of fact, corroborated by any number of witnesses, is that Maximilian Kolbe did not know what hatred was. Whether in the prison at Pawiak in Warsaw, or behind the barbed wire fence in Auschwitz, he looked with the same clear-sighted vision on executioners and victims alike, so much so that some of the more sadistic among the former could not face his gaze. “Don’t look at us like that!” they barked at him. This man, who had become a mere number, 16,670, had won the most arduous of all victories, the victory of love which forgives and pardons. He broke through the infernal circle of hate’s dialectic with a heart full of love, and at once the hellish spell was exorcized, and love showed itself stronger than death. Is his witness not strikingly relevant in times like these, when love is so often stretched out on a cross, so often cleft in twain? How few people there are nowadays, whose brotherly love does not admit of some form of segregation . . . by race, or nation, or ideology!

A Precursor in the Use of Mass Media

Father Maximilian Kolbe was also a pioneer in a domain to which attention has been called by one of the pastoral documents of Vatican II, the mass media.

He started with nothing; he braved the disapproval of those who looked askance on religious engaged in the apostolate of the press. This man with his poor health, (he had only one-fourth of a lung!) succeeded in starting his “little blue magazine” which by 1939 had nearly a million subscribers, and a newspaper of very modest appearance destined for ordinary folk, peasants and working people. Today we can see that his labors in this field prepared Poland for the bloody trial awaiting her, a trial which cost her over six million dead during the Second World War. Father Maximilian Kolbe, a man who took the beatitudes seriously, turned first of all toward the “poor servants of Yahweh,” the “anawim,” who hungered for the word of God even more than for bread. To serve them he wanted to make use of all the resources of technology, all the latest conquests of progress. In 1938 he inaugurated a broadcasting station, and gave serious thought to creating an airport at Niepokalanow, the “city of the Immaculate.” When a group of prelates, somewhat shocked by all these “wild projects” of his asked him, “What would St. Francis be doing in your place?” he replied without batting an eyelash: “He would roll up his sleeves and set to work with us!”

As he saw it, the “Canticle of Creatures” included the huge rotary presses and the linotype machines; and the 600 Brothers at Niepokalanow made them sing a song of praise to the glory of God. In the writings of Father Maximilian Kolbe, one could find all the elements needed for a theology of work, the horizontal dimensions of which imply the vertical dimension, the fruitful tension of the Cross

A Precursor of Vatican II's Marian Theology

This man whose ambitions were as vast as the universe, did he not adopt as his own St. Francis of Assisi's words?: “Vorrei mandarvi tutti in paradiso” (“I should like to send all of you to Paradise”); this missionary who established in Japan his apostolate of the press, wished to bear witness by his life and death to his love

for our Lady whom he invoked under her title of the Immaculate Conception. His Marian theology possesses a doctrinal accuracy that enchants those familiar with that keystone of Vatican II, the Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*. One is tempted to say that he had foreseen, even in its wording, the admirable eighth chapter consecrated to the Virgin Mary.

The spiritual fecundity of this humble religious, who was not only a marvel of efficiency, something that our technocratic world appreciates, but also one of the greatest contemplatives of our time, bears witness before the entire world to the unique role played by the Virgin Mother of God. Mother of the Head, she is also the mother of his Body the Church: Christ “spread out and communicated” as Bossuet calls it.

Father Maximilian Kolbe Invites Us to Take a Stand

It is not by mere chance, it is indeed a sign of the times, that this priest who died in 1941, at the age of 47, in the starvation bunker at Auschwitz, should be beatified during the present Synod whose special purpose was to define more specifically the meaning of the priestly ministry.

To the more or less abstract questions asked, he gives a concrete answer, this man of flesh and blood, who was not content himself with mouthing fine phrases, but who went “all the way” in his fidelity to his obligations, who gave blood for blood. We have been questioning him; but in reality, it is he who challenges us, calling on us to take a stand and to live up to it. It is not enough to admire him in Bernini’s “gloria.” We must ask him, in the secret of our own hearts, what he has to tell us, each one of us, personally.

Hail, Full of Grace, the Lord is with You” (Lk 1:28)

*Saint John Paul II, Homily at St. Mary
Major Basilica, Rome, December 8, 1982*

While these words of the angel’s greeting softly re-echo in our mind, I wish to turn my glance, along with you, dear brothers and sisters, to the mystery of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, with the spiritual eye of Saint Maximilian Kolbe. He bound all the works of his life and his vocation to Mary Immaculate. And therefore, this year, in which he was elevated to the glory of the saints, he has much to tell us on the solemnity of Mary Immaculate, whose devout “militant” he loved to call himself.

His love for Mary Immaculate was indeed the center of his spiritual life, the fruitful inspiring principle of his apostolic activity. The sublime model of Mary Immaculate illuminated and guided his entire existence along his ways in the world and made his heroic death in the extermination camp of Auschwitz a splendid Christian and priestly witness. With the intuition of a saint and the refinement of a theologian, Maximilian Kolbe meditated with extraordinary insight on the mystery of Mary’s Immaculate Conception in the light of Sacred Scripture, the Magisterium, and the Liturgy of the Church, drawing from them wonderful lessons for life. He has appeared in our time as a prophet and an apostle of a new “Marian era,” destined to make Jesus Christ and his Gospel shine with a bright light in the entire world.

This mission that he carried out with ardor and dedication, “classified him,” as Paul VI stated in the homily at his beatification, “among the great saints and clairvoyant minds that have understood, venerated and sung the mystery of Mary” (*Insegnamenti di Paolo VI*, [X, 1971, p. 909]). Though he was aware of the inexhaustible depths of the mystery of the Immaculate Conception, for which “human words are not able to describe

her who became the Mother of God” (Writings of Maximilian Kolbe, Hero of Oswiecim and Blessed of the Church, Vol. 3, Ed. Citta di Vita, Florence, 1975, v. III, p. 690), his greatest regret was that Mary Immaculate was not sufficiently known and loved after the example of Jesus Christ and how the Tradition of the Church and the examples of the saints teach us. Indeed, in loving Mary we honor God, who raised her to the dignity of the Mother of His Son made man, and we unite ourselves with Jesus Christ who loved Her as a Mother. We will never love her as he loved her: “Jesus was the first to honor her as his mother, and we must imitate Him in this also. We will never be able to equal the love with which Jesus loved Her” (ibid., v. H, p. 351). Love for Mary, Father Maximilian states, is the simplest and easiest way to sanctify ourselves, fulfilling our Christian vocation. The love of which he speaks is certainly not a superficial sentimentalism, but it is a generous commitment, it is a giving of the whole person, as he himself showed us with his life of evangelical fidelity right up to his heroic death.

St. Maximilian Kolbe’s attention was incessantly concentrated on Mary’s Immaculate Conception in order to be able to gather the marvelous wealth contained in the name that she herself revealed and that constitutes the explanation of what today’s Gospel teaches us in the words of the Angel Gabriel: “Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you” (Lk 1:28). Recalling the apparitions at Lourdes - which for him were a stimulus and an incentive to better understand the fonts of Revelation - he observes: “To Saint Bernadette, who had questioned her many times, the Virgin answered, ‘I am the Immaculate Conception.’

With these words she clearly revealed that she not only is conceived without sin, but she is moreover the very ‘Immaculate Conception,’ just as a white object is one thing and whiteness is something else; a perfect thing is one thing, perfection is something else” (ibid., v. III, p. 516). The Immaculate Conception is the name which reveals with precision who Mary is: it not only affirms a quality, but it exactly defines her person: Mary is radically holy in the totality of her existence, from the very beginning.

The sublime, supernatural grandeur was granted to Mary with regard to Jesus Christ; it is in Him and through him that God shared with her the fullness of sanctity. Mary is Immaculate because she is the Mother of God, and she became the Mother of God because she is Immaculate, Maximilian Kolbe states in clear-cut terms. Mary's Immaculate Conception manifests in a unique and sublime way the absolute centrality and the universal salvific role of Jesus Christ. "From the divine motherhood flow all the graces given to the Most Holy Virgin Mary, and the first of these is her Immaculate Conception" (ibid., v. III, p. 475). For this reason, Mary is not simply like Eve before original sin, but she was enriched with a fullness of incomparable grace because she is the Mother of Christ, and the Immaculate Conception was the beginning of a prodigious uninterrupted growth of her supernatural life.

The mystery of Mary's sanctity must be contemplated in the totality of the divine order of salvation in order to be grasped in a harmonious way, lest it appear that this privilege separates her from the Church, which is the Body of Christ. Father Maximilian takes great pains to tie Mary's Immaculate Conception and her role in the plan of salvation to the mystery of the Trinity, and in a completely special way to the Person of the Holy Spirit. With profound cleverness he developed the multiple aspects contained in the notion of "Spouse of the Holy Spirit," well known in patristic and theological tradition and suggested by the New Testament: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; hence the holy offspring to be born will be called Son of God" (Lk 1:35).

It is an analogy, Saint Maximilian Kolbe stresses, and that gives a glimpse of the ineffable, intimate and fruitful union between the Holy Spirit and Mary. "The Holy Spirit established his dwelling in Mary from the very first moment of her existence, he took absolute possession of her and so pervaded her that the name of Spouse of the Holy Spirit cannot express more than a far-off, pale, imperfect shadow of this union" (ibid., v III p. 515).

Investigating with ecstatic admiration the divine plan of salvation, which has its source in the Father Who willed to communicate freely to creatures the divine life of Jesus Christ,

and which was manifested in Mary Immaculate in a marvelous way, Father Kolbe, fascinated and enraptured, exclaims, “There is love everywhere” (ibid., v. III, p. 690).

The gratuitous love of God is the answer to all questions. “God is love,” St. John affirms (1 Jn 4:8). Everything that exists is a reflection of the free love of God, and therefore every creature expresses in some way its infinite splendor. In a particular way, love is the center and vertex of the human person, made in the image and likeness of God. Mary Immaculate, the highest and most perfect of human persons, eminently reproduces the image of God and is therefore made capable of loving Him with incomparable intensity as the Immaculate, without distractions or slackening. She is the unique handmaid of the Lord (cf. Lk 1:38) who with her free and personal fiat responds to God’s love by always doing what He asks of her. As the response of every other creature, hers is not an autonomous response, but it is a grace and a gift of God. In this response there is involved all of her freedom, the freedom of the Immaculate. “In the union of the Holy Spirit with Mary, love does not join only these two persons, but the first love is all the love of the Most Holy Trinity, while the second, Mary’s, is all the love of creation, and so in this union heaven is united to earth, all the uncreated Love with all created love.

... It is the vertex of love” (ibid., v. III, p. 758). The circulating nature of love, which originates from the Father and which in Mary’s response returns to its source, is a characteristic and fundamental aspect of Father Kolbe’s Marian thought. It is this principle that is at the base of his Christian anthropology, his view of the history and the spiritual life of every person.

Mary Immaculate is the archetype and fullness of every creature love; her crystal-clear and most intense love for God includes in its perfection that fragile and soiled love of other creatures. Mary’s response is that of all humanity. All this does not obscure nor diminish the absolute centrality of Jesus Christ in the order of salvation, but illuminates it and proclaims it vigorously, because Mary derives all her grandeur from Him. As the history of the Church teaches, Mary’s role is to make her Son shine, to lead to Him, and to help welcome Him.

The continual theological investigation of the mystery of Mary Immaculate became for Maximilian Kolbe the source and the motive for unlimited giving and extraordinary dynamism. He truly knew how to incorporate the truth into life, also because he attained a knowledge of Mary, as all the saints, not only from reflection guided by faith, but especially from prayer. “Anyone who is not capable of bending his knees and imploring from Mary in humble prayer the grace to know who she really is, cannot hope to learn more about her” (ibid., v. III, p. 474)

And now, receiving this final exhortation of the heroic son of Poland and the authentic messenger of Marian devotion, gathered in this splendid basilica for the Eucharistic Prayer in honor of the Immaculate Conception, we will bend our knees before her image and will repeat to her, with that ardor and filial piety that so distinguished Saint Maximilian, the words of the angel: “Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you.” Amen.

Apostolic Pilgrimage to Poland Holy Mass at the Concentration Camp

*Homily of Saint John Paul II
in Auschwitz-Birkenau, June 7, 1979*

1. “This is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith” (1 Jn 5:4).

These words from the Letter of Saint John come to my mind and enter my heart as I find myself in this place in which a special victory was won through faith; through the faith that gives rise to love of God and of one’s neighbor, the unique love, the supreme love that is ready to “lay down (one’s) life for (one’s) friends” (Jn 15:13; cf. 10:11). A victory, therefore, through love enlivened by faith to the extreme point of the final definitive witness.

This victory through faith and love was won in this place by a man whose first name is Maximilian Maria. Surname: Kolbe. Profession (as registered in the books of the concentration camp): Catholic priest. Vocation: a son of Saint Francis. Birth: a son of simple, hardworking devout parents, who were weavers near Łódź. By God's grace and the Church's judgment: Blessed.

The victory through faith and love was won by him in this place, which was built for the negation of faith—faith in God and faith in man—and to trample radically not only on love but on all signs of human dignity, of humanity. A place built on hatred and on contempt for man in the name of a crazed ideology. A place built on cruelty. On the entrance gate which still exists, is placed the inscription “Arbeit macht frei”, which has a sardonic sound, since its meaning was radically contradicted by what took place within.

In this site of the terrible slaughter that brought death to four million people of different nations, Father Maximilian voluntarily offered himself for death in the starvation bunker for a brother, and so won a spiritual victory like that of Christ himself. This brother still lives today in the land of Poland and is here with us.

But was Father Maximilian Kolbe the only one? Certainly, he won a victory that was immediately felt by his companions in captivity and is still felt today by the Church and the world. However, there is no doubt that many other similar victories were won. I am thinking, for example, of the death in the gas chamber of the Carmelite Sister Benedicta of the Cross, whose name in the world was Edith Stein, who was an illustrious pupil of Husserl and became one of the glories of contemporary German philosophy, and who was a descendant of a Jewish family living in Wrocław.

I do not want to stay only with those two names, when I ask myself, was it only he or she alone...? How many similar victories were here? These victories were made by people of different faiths, different ideologies, certainly not just believers.

We want to embrace with a feeling of deepest reverence each of these victories, every manifestation of humanity.

They were the negation of a system of systematic negation of humanity. In the place of terrible devastation of humanity and human dignity – there is victory of humanity!

Can it still be a surprise to anyone that the Pope born and brought up in this land, the Pope who came to the see of Saint Peter from the diocese in whose territory is situated the camp of Auschwitz, should have begun his first Encyclical with the words *Redemptor Hominis* and should have dedicated it as a whole to the cause of man, to the dignity of man to the threats to him, and finally to his inalienable rights that can so easily be trampled on and annihilated by his fellowmen? Is it enough to put man in a different uniform, arm him with the apparatus of violence? Is it enough to impose on him an ideology in which human rights are subjected to the demands of the system, completely subjected to them, so as in practice not to exist at all?

2. I am here today as a pilgrim. It is well known that I have been here many times. So many times! And many times, I have gone down to Maximilian Kolbe's death cell and kneeled in front of the execution wall and passed among the ruins of the cremation furnaces of Birkenau. It was impossible for me not to come here as Pope.

I have come then to this special shrine, the birthplace, I can say, of the patron of our difficult century, just as nine centuries ago Skalka was the place of the birth under the sword of Saint Stanislaus, Patron of the Poles.

I come not only to honor the patron of our century, I come with the aim together with you, independent of what your faith is, once again to take care of the human being.

I have come to pray with all of you who have come here today and with the whole of Poland and the whole of Europe. Christ wishes that I who have become the Successor of Peter should give witness before the world to what constitutes the greatness and the misery of contemporary man, to what is his defeat and his victory.

I have come and I kneel on this Golgotha of the modern world, on these tombs, largely nameless like the great Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. I kneel before all the inscriptions that come

one after another bearing the memory of the victims of Birkenau in languages: Polish, English, Bulgarian, Romany, Czech, Danish, French, Greek, Hebrew, Yiddish, Spanish, Flemish, Serbo-Croat, German, Norwegian, Russian, Romanian, Hungarian, and Italian.

In particular I pause with you, dear participants in this encounter, before the inscription in Hebrew. This inscription awakens the memory of the People whose sons and daughters were intended for total extermination. This People draws its origin from Abraham, our father in faith (cf. Rom 4:12), as was expressed by Paul of Tarsus. The very people that received from God the commandment “Thou shalt not kill”, itself experienced in a special measure what is meant by killing. It is not permissible for anyone to pass by this inscription with indifference.

And one inscription more, a chosen one, the plaque in the Russian language. I don't add any comment. We know which nation the inscription is about. We know about their participation in the last terrible war for the freedom of peoples. Also, this inscription we should not pass with indifference.

Finally, the last inscription: that in Polish. Six million Poles lost their lives during the Second World War: a fifth of the nation. Yet another stage in the centuries-old fight of this nation, my nation, for its fundamental rights among the peoples of Europe. Yet another loud cry for the right to a place of its own on the map of Europe. Yet another painful reckoning with the conscience of mankind.

I chose three plaques. A stop should be made at all three and we will do so.

3. Auschwitz is such a reckoning through these plaques which remind us of the sacrifices the nations suffered. It is impossible merely to visit it. It is necessary on this occasion to think with fear of how far hatred can go.

Auschwitz is a testimony of war. War brings with it a disproportionate growth of hatred, destruction and cruelty. It cannot be denied that it also manifests new capabilities of human courage, heroism and patriotism, but the fact remains that it is the reckoning of the losses that prevails. That reckoning prevails more and more, since each day sees an increase in the destructive

capacity of the weapons invented by modern technology. Not only those who directly bring about wars are responsible for them, but also those who fail to do all they can to prevent them.

Therefore, I would like to repeat in this place the words that Paul VI pronounced before the United Nations Organizations:

“It is enough to remember that the blood of millions of men, numberless and unprecedented sufferings, useless slaughter and frightful ruin, are the sanction of the covenant which unites you in a solemn pledge which must change the future history of the world: No more war, war never again. It is peace, peace which must guide the destinies of peoples and of all mankind” (AAS 57, 1965, p. 881).

If, however Auschwitz’s great call and the cry of man tortured here is to bear fruit for Europe and for the world also, the Declaration of Human Rights must have all its just consequences drawn from it, as John XXIII urged in the encyclical “Pacem in Terris”. For the Declaration is a solemn recognition of the personal dignity of every human being; an assertion of everyone’s right to be free to seek out the truth, to follow moral principles, discharge the duties imposed by justice, and lead a fully human life. (John XXIII, “Pacem in Terris”, IV – AAS 55, 1963, pp. 295-296). These rights are universal, inviolable and inalienable.

There must be a return to the wisdom of the old teacher Paweł Włodkowic, Rector of the Jagellonian University at Krakow in the 15th century, and the rights of nations must be ensured: their right to existence, to freedom, to independence, to their own culture, and to honorable development.

Włodkowic wrote: “Where power is more at work than love, people seek their own interests and not those of Jesus Christ, and accordingly they easily depart from the rule of God’s law... All the kinds of law are against those who threaten people wishing to live in peace: against them is the civil law... the canon law... the natural law, expressed in the principle ‘Do to others what you would have done to you’. Against them is the divine law, in that... the commandment ‘Thou shalt not steal’ forbids all robbery, and the commandment ‘Thou shalt not kill’ forbids all violence (Paweł Włodkowic, “Saevientibus” [1415], Tract. II, Solutio quaest. 4a; cf. L. Ehrlich, “Pisma wybrane Pawła Włodkowica”, Warszawa 1968, t. 1, p. 61; pp. 58-59).

But it is not only in terms of rights, but also and above all it is about love: that love of neighbor which expresses and gives a voice to the love of God, the love which Christ proclaimed in His commandment and that every man has written in his heart the commandment which God the Creator carved in the heart.

This commandment is concretized in respect for the other, respect for his personality, his conscience; is concretized in dialogue with others, in the ability to search and acknowledge what can be good and positive also in someone who represents ideas different from ours, even in someone who in good will err.

Never one at the other's expense, at the cost of the enslavement of the other, at the cost of conquest, outrage, exploitation and death! He who is speaking these words is the unworthy successor of John XXIII and Paul VI. But he is also the son of a nation that in its history has suffered many afflictions from others.

Allow me however not to mention those others by name, let me not mention... We stand in this place where we want to think that every nation and every person is a brother. And if in what I said was bitter – my dear brothers and sisters – I did not say that to accuse anyone. I said it in order to remember.

I speak not only because of those who died, the four million victims of this vast field, I say it in the name of all the nations whose rights are being violated and forgotten. I speak, because it obliges me, obliges all of us – to the truth. I speak, because it obliges me, it obliges all of us, to care for humanity.

And because of this, I ask all who hear me, that you focus, that you focus all your powers for the care of the human being. But those who listen to me with faith in Jesus Christ, I ask you, to focus in prayer for peace and reconciliation.

My dear brothers and sisters, I have nothing more to say. I call to mind the words of the supplication: Holy is God! Holy and strong! Holy Immortal One! From plague, from famine, from fire and from war ... and from war, deliver us, Lord. Amen.

Saint Edith Stein and Saint Maximilian Maria Kolbe

*Benedict XVI, General Audience
Wednesday, August 13, 2008*

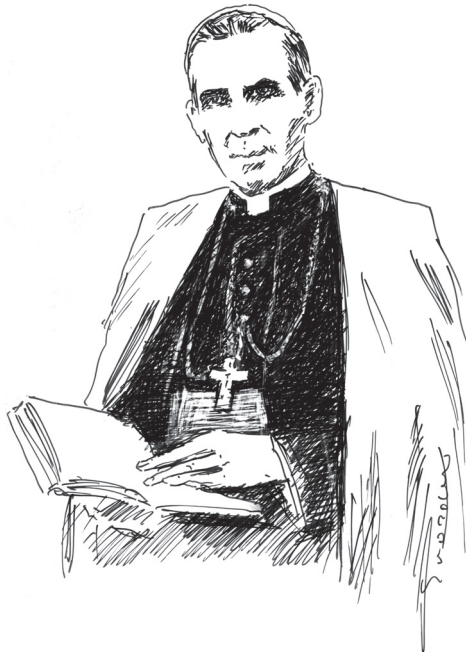
Dear Brothers and Sisters,

[...] Those who pray never lose hope, even when they find themselves in a difficult and even humanly hopeless plight. Sacred Scripture teaches us this and Church history bears witness to this. In fact, how many examples we could cite of situations in which it was precisely prayer that sustained the journey of Saints and of the Christian people! Among the testimonies of our epoch I would like to mention the examples of two Saints whom we are commemorating in these days: Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, Edith Stein, whose feast we celebrated on 9 August, and Maximilian Maria Kolbe, whom we will commemorate tomorrow, on 14 August, the eve of the Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Both ended their earthly life with martyrdom in the concentration camp of Auschwitz. Their lives might seem to have been a defeat, but it is precisely in their martyrdom that the brightness of Love which dispels the gloom of selfishness and hatred shines forth. The following words are attributed to St Maximilian Kolbe, who is said to have spoken them when the Nazi persecution was raging: “Hatred is not a creative force: only love is creative”. And heroic proof of his love was the generous offering he made of himself in exchange for a fellow prisoner, an offer that culminated in his death in the starvation bunker on 14 August 1941.

On 6 August the following year, three days before her tragic end, Edith Stein approaching some Sisters in the monastery of Echt, in the Netherlands, said to them: “I am ready for anything. Jesus is also here in our midst. Thus far I have been able to pray very well and I have said with all my heart: “Ave, Crux, spes unica”. Witnesses who managed to escape the terrible massacre recounted that while Teresa Benedicta of the Cross,

dressed in the Carmelite habit, was making her way, consciously, toward death, she distinguished herself by her conduct full of peace, her serene attitude and her calm behavior, attentive to the needs of all. Prayer was the secret of this Saint, Co-Patroness of Europe, who, “Even after she found the truth in the peace of the contemplative life, she was to live to the full the mystery of the Cross” (Apostolic Letter *Spes Aedificandi*).

“Hail Mary!” was the last prayer on the lips of St Maximilian Maria Kolbe, as he offered his arm to the person who was about to kill him with an injection of phenolic acid. It is moving to note how humble and trusting recourse to Our Lady is always a source of courage and serenity. While we prepare to celebrate the Solemnity of the Assumption, which is one of the best-loved Marian feasts in the Christian tradition, let us renew our entrustment to her who from Heaven watches over us with motherly love at every moment. In fact, we say this in the familiar prayer of the Hail Mary, asking her to pray for us “now and at the hour of our death”.



The Woman He Loved. Martyrs do have a Way of Speaking the Truth!

*Archbishop Fulton Sheen
Feast of our Lady of Sorrow
September 15, 1977*

Many are the ways to become intelligent, but there are only two ways to become wise: one is through holiness and the illumination of the Spirit, the other is through suffering. St. Maximilian Kolbe chose the second way. Inscribed on his arm in deep blue ink was his prison number under the Nazis, 16670. But in the ranks of heaven, his number is not far behind the Divine Prisoner Number 1 who said, "Greater love than this no man has, that he lay down his life for his friends."

The Paschal Lamb in the Old Testament was the substitute for the first born of the Israelite family. Christ, the true Lamb of God, became the "stand in" for our deserved death because of our sins. Maximilian Kolbe was the vicarious substitute for the father of a family, as he went to his death on the eve of the Feast of the Assumption of Our Lady. By that one act, he brought a double bounty to the twentieth century. The first as a reminder to the Church to keep together in the Great Commandment, the love of God and love of neighbor.

For many decades past, emphasis was put on individual sanctification but with little stress on social justice. How many confessors in the last hundred years ever heard a penitent confess, "I am not paying a living wage to those who work for me", but they would confess a distraction in prayer. Now unfortunately there is a reaction to the other extreme when, if one carries a banner for racial justice or marches in a protest parade against the building of an atomic reactor, he will find so-called theologians who will deny any guilt to fornicators and those who violate the natural laws of God.

Thus, it would seem there are two kinds of atheism: atheism of the right, which denies God, and atheism of the left, which denies neighbor. To overcome this, the Holy Spirit in addition to proclaiming love of God and neighbor, placards before the twentieth century the life of a saintly soul who practiced both - not only in minute touches on the canvas of monastic life, but by one great stroke in the oblation of God-consecrated life for the sake of neighbor. The vertical piety directed to God now took on a horizontal dimension in the laying down of his life for a friend.

G.K. Chesterton wrote in *Heretics*, “We have to love our neighbor because he is there. He is the sample of humanity that is actually given us. Precisely because he may be anybody, he is everybody.” Father Kolbe died for everybody, for that is another name for neighbor. And in doing so, while himself starving, he gave the lie to those who say, ‘No one can love his neighbor on an empty stomach.’ His stomach was empty, but his heart was full.

Like a child who is greedy when asked, “Do you want the chocolate in your right hand or in your left hand?” Maximilian when asked by the Blessed Virgin whether he wanted a white crown of sanctity or a red crown of martyrdom, in that sweet avariciousness of love said, “I will take both.

Unable to decide whether to die in the white heat of Divine Love or in the blood-red witnessing of martyrdom, the Divine Savior gave him both, and did so on the eve of the day when the Church celebrates the feast of instant entry into heaven.

The notes Father Kolbe left us are simple in themselves, but become suffused with truths written by this holy friar. One need only recall that each truth about Mary, prayer, Church doctrine and the saving of the soul came from a brain and hand that died for another on the eve of the day when the believing world celebrates the feast of the glorification of the woman he loved. Martyrs do have a way of speaking the truth!

The monk who saved humanity

For his fellow prisoners, this priest's voluntary death was proof there is a place for heroism even in a concentration camp and it showed that despite the Nazis' best efforts it is possible to maintain human dignity and true love.

The interview with Michał Micherdziński, one of the last witnesses of the sacrifice of St. Maximilian Kolbe instead of a fellow prisoner, made the night of July 29-30, 1941 in the Concentration Camp Auschwitz-Birkenau. Interview by Fr. Witold Pobiedziński

– You were prisoner in the Auschwitz concentration camp for five years. You personally met St. Maximilian Maria Kolbe there. How important for you and the other prisoners was the presence of this monk amongst you?

All prisoners coming to Auschwitz were greeted with the same words: “You did not come to a sanatorium but to a German concentration camp from which there is no other way out than through the chimney. Jews can live for two weeks, priests live a month, and the rest live three months. Those who do not like it may just go to the wire.” This meant that they could be killed, because there flowed nonstop high-voltage current in the wires surrounding the camp. These words announced at the beginning of their detention deprived the prisoners of hope. I was granted incredible grace in Auschwitz, because I stayed in one block with Fr. Maximilian, and I was standing with him in one row at the time of the selection for death. I was an eyewitness of his heroic sacrifice, which brought hope back to me and other prisoners.

– What were the circumstances of this event, which is still of so great and keen interest and inspires people to ask the question: Why did he do it, what values did he stand for?

63 years ago, on Tuesday, July 29, 1941, at about 1:00 o'clock, just after the midday roll call, the alarm sirens howled. More than 100 decibels went through the camp. The prisoners, by the sweat of their brow, were fulfilling their duties. The howl of sirens meant the alarm, and the alarm meant that some prisoner was missing. The SS immediately stopped the work and began escorting prisoners to the camp for roll-call to check the number of prisoners. For us who worked on the construction of a nearby rubber factory, it meant a seven kilometer march to the camp. We were rushed to report back.

Roll-call showed a tragic thing: There was one prisoner missing from our Block 14a. When I say "from our block" I mean that of Fr. Maximilian, Franciszek Gajowniczek, others and myself. It was a frightening message. All other prisoners were relieved and were allowed to go back to their blocks, and the penalty was announced to us — standing at attention without caps, day and night, hungry. The night was very cold. When the SS had a changing of the guard, we crowded together like bees — those standing outside warmed those in the middle, and then there was a change.

Many older people could not withstand the agony of standing in the night and in the cold. We wished for at least a little sun to warm us. We also expected the worst. In the morning, the German officer shouted at us: "Because a prisoner escaped from your block and you did not prevent it or stop it, ten of you will die of starvation in order that the others will remember that even the smallest attempts to escape will not be tolerated." Selection began.

- What happens with a man when he knows that this may be the last moment of his life? What feelings accompanied the prisoners who could hear the sentence condemning them to death?

I'd rather spare myself remembering the details of this terrible situation. I will tell generally what the selection looked like: The whole group went to the beginning of the first line. At the front, two steps ahead of us, a German captain was standing. He looked you in the eye like a vulture.

He would measure each of us and then raise his right hand and say, “Du!” that is “You.” This “Du!” meant that you will die of starvation, and he would go on. The SS-men dragged the unfortunate prisoner out of his place in the row, wrote down the number, and set him aside under guard.

“Du!” sounded like a hammer hitting an empty chest. Everyone was afraid that anytime the finger might point at him. The line under scrutiny moved a few steps forward, so that between the lines being scrutinized and the next line something like corridors formed, with a free space of a width three to four meters. The SS-man walked along this corridor and again said, “Du! Du.” Our hearts thudded. With noise in heads, blood throbbing in temples, it seemed to us that the blood would spring out of our noses, ears, and eyes. It was something tragic.

– How was St. Maximilian behaving during this selection?

Fr. Maximilian and I were standing in the seventh row. He stood on my left; perhaps two or three friends separated me from him. As the rows behind us dwindled, more and more fear started enveloping me. I must say, no matter how much a man is determined and frightened, no philosophy is then needed for him. Happy is the one who has a faith, who is able to fall back on somebody, to ask somebody for the mercy. I prayed to the Mother of God. I must honestly confess it; I had never before nor afterwards prayed so zealously.

Although there was still heard “Du!” the prayer inwardly changed me, enough for me to be calmer. People having a faith were not so terrified. They were ready to accept destiny with peace, almost like heroes. It is great consolation. The SS-man passed me by, sweeping with his eyes, and then passed Fr. Maximilian by. He “liked” Franciszek Gajowniczek standing at the end of the row, who was a 41-year sergeant of the Polish Army. When the German said “Du!” and pointed at him, the poor man exclaimed, “Jesus, Mary! My wife, my children!” Of course, the SS-men did not take notice of the words of prisoners, and just wrote down his number. Gajowniczek later swore that if he had died in the hunger bunker, he wouldn’t have known that such a lament, such an imploring request came out of his mouth.

– After the selection was finished, did the remaining prisoners feel relief that the great terror was over?

The selection ended. The ten prisoners were already chosen. It was a closing roll-call for them. We thought that this nightmare of standing would end: our heads ached, we wanted to eat, and our legs were swelling. Suddenly some commotion started in my row. We stood at intervals the length of our clogs apart, when all of a sudden somebody began going forward between prisoners. It was Fr. Maximilian.

He was going by in short steps, since one could not go by long strides in clogs, because it was necessary to curl one's toes in order to keep the clogs from falling off. He was going straight towards the group of SS men, standing by the first row of prisoners. Everyone shivered, since this was breaking one of the most insisted upon rules, the breaking of which was brutally punished. The exit from the row meant death. New prisoners arriving to the camp, not knowing about this ban against leaving the row were beaten until they were incapacitated from work. It equaled going to the starvation bunker.

We were certain that they would kill Fr. Maximilian even before he managed to get through. But something extraordinary happened that was unheard of in the history of seven hundred concentration camps of The Third Reich. It has never happened that a prisoner of a camp could leave the row without being punished. It was something so unimaginable for SS men that they stood dumbfounded. They looked at each other as they didn't know what was happening.

– What happened next?

Fr. Maximilian walked in his clogs and striped prison uniform with his bowl at his side. He didn't walk like a beggar, nor like a hero. He walked like a man conscious of a great mission. He stood calmly before the officers.

The camp commandant finally came to his senses. Furious, he asked his deputy, "Was will dieses polnische Schwein?" (What does this Polish swine want?). They started looking for the translator, but it turned out that the translator was unnecessary.

Fr. Maximilian answered calmly: “Ich will sterben für ihn,” pointing with his hand at Gajowniczek standing beside: “I want to die instead of him.”

The Germans stood speechless with their mouths open with amazement. For them, representing the secular ungodliness, it was something incomprehensible that somebody may wish to die for other man. They looked at Fr. Maximilian with the questions in their eyes: Has he gone crazy? Maybe we didn't understand what he said?

Finally the second question was put forward: “Wer bist du?” (Who are you?).

Fr. Maximilian answered, “Ich bin ein polnischer katolischer Priester.” (I am a Polish Catholic priest). Here the prisoner confessed that he was Polish and comes from the nation which these Germans hated. Further, he was admitting that he is a clergyman.

For SS men, the priest was a twinge of conscience.

It is interesting that, in this dialogue, Fr. Maximilian did not once use the word “please”. With his statement, he broke the German's usurped authority to decide on life and death, and he forced them to change the sentence. He behaved like an experienced diplomat. Only instead of a tailcoat, a sash, and medals, he presented himself in striped prison garb, a bowl, and clogs. The deathly silence prevailed, and every second seemed to last centuries.

Finally something happened, which neither the Germans nor the prisoners can understand to this day. The SS captain turned to Fr. Maximilian and addressed him formally with “Sie” (formal “you”) and then asked, “Warum wollen Sie für ihn sterben?” (Why do you want to die instead of him?).

All canons, which the SS man confessed earlier, fell apart. A moment ago he had called him the “Polish swine,” and now was turning to him with “Sie.” The SS men and non-commissioned officers standing beside him weren't sure whether they heard right. Only once in the history of concentration camps had the high-ranking officer who murdered thousands of people addressed a prisoner this way.

Fr. Maximilian answered, “Er hat eine Frau und Kinder” (He has a wife and children).

It is the entire catechism in a nutshell. He taught everyone what fatherhood and family means. He was a man with two doctorates obtained in Rome with “summa cum laude” (highest possible with honor), editor, missionary, academic teacher of two universities in Cracow and Nagasaki. He thought that his life was less worth than the life of the father of a family! It was a wonderful lesson in catechism!

– How did the officer react to the words of Fr. Maximilian?

Everyone was waiting to see what would happen next. The SS-man was convinced that he was the master of life and death. He could order him to be beaten badly for breaking the most strictly followed rule of stepping out of the line. And more importantly, does a prisoner dare preach morality?! He could sentence both to death by starvation. After a few seconds, the SS-man said, “Gut” (very well). He agreed with Fr. Maximilian, and admitted that he was right. It meant that the good won over evil, the maximum evil.

There is no greater evil than to sentence a man to death by starvation through hatred. But neither is there a greater good than to give one’s own life for another man. The maximum good won. I want to stress the replies of Fr. Maximilian: He was asked questions thrice and thrice he answered concisely and briefly, using four words. Number four in the Bible symbolically means the entire man.

– How important was it for you and the remaining prisoners to be eyewitnesses?

The Germans let Gajowniczek back to the line, and Fr. Maximilian took his place. The convicts had to take their clogs off, because they were already unnecessary. The door of the hunger bunker was opened only in order to take bodies out. Fr. Maximilian walked in as one of the last pair, and he even helped the other prisoner to walk. In principle, it was their own funeral before death. In front of the block, they were told to take the striped uniforms off and were thrown into a cell with an area

of eight square meters. Sunlight seeped through the three bars of the window onto the cold, rough, wet floor, and black walls.

Another miracle happened there. Fr. Maximilian, although he had been breathing only with one lung, survived all. He was alive in the chamber of death 386 hours. Every doctor will recognize that this is incredible. After this horrendous period of dying, the executioner in white medical overalls gave him a lethal injection. Yet again, he didn't die.... They had to finish him off with a second injection. He died on eve of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, his Hetmanka (Commander in chief of the armies). He wanted to work and die for the Immaculate Mary throughout his life. It was the greatest happiness for him.

– Referring to the first question, be so kind and add, please, what did this extra-ordinary attitude of Fr. Maximilian mean for you, being rescued from death by starvation?

The sacrifice of Fr. Maximilian inspired a lot of work. He strengthened the activity of the camp group of the resistance, the underground prisoner organization, and it divided the time into “before” and “after” the sacrifice of Fr. Maximilian. Many prisoners survived the camp, thanks to the existence and operation of this organization. A few of us were rescued, two in every hundred. I received grace, because I am one of these two. Franciszek Gajowniczek was not only rescued but also lived another 54 years.

Our saintly fellow-prisoner rescued, above all, the humanity in us. He was a spiritual shepherd in the hunger chamber, supported, led prayers, absolved sin, and led the dying out to the other world with the Sign of the Cross. He strengthened the faith and hope in us who survived the selection. Amidst this destruction, terror, and the evil, he restored hope.

A personal testimony about the way Maximilian Kolbe met death is given by Bruno Borgowiec, one of the few Poles who were assigned to render service to the starvation bunker. He told it to his parish priest before he died in 1947

“The ten condemned to death went through terrible days. From the underground cell in which they were shut up there

continually arose the echo of prayers and canticles. The man in-charge of emptying the buckets of urine found them always empty. Thirst drove the prisoners to drink the contents. Since they had grown very weak, prayers were now only whispered. At every inspection, when almost all the others were now lying on the floor, Father Kolbe was seen kneeling or standing in the center as he looked cheerfully in the face of the SS-men.

Father Kolbe never asked for anything and did not complain, rather he encouraged the others, saying that the fugitive might be found and then they would all be freed. One of the SS guards remarked: *this priest is really a great man. We have never seen anyone like him...*

Two weeks passed in this way. Meanwhile one after another they died, until only Father Kolbe was left. This the authorities felt was too long. The cell was needed for new victims. So one day they brought in the head of the sick-quarters, a German named Bock, who gave Father Kolbe an injection of carbolic acid in the vein of his left arm. Father Kolbe, with a prayer on his lips, himself gave his arm to the executioner. Unable to watch this I left under the pretext of work to be done. Immediately after the SS men had left I returned to the cell, where I found Father Kolbe leaning in a sitting position against the back wall with his eyes open and his head drooping sideways. His face was calm and radiant”.

So it was that Father Maximilian Kolbe was executed on 14 August, 1941 at the age of forty-seven years, a martyr of charity. The death certificate, as always made out with German precision, indicated the hour of death 12:30.

Father Kolbe’s body was removed to the crematorium, and without dignity or ceremony was disposed of, like hundreds of thousands who had gone before him, and hundreds of thousands more who would follow.

The heroism of Father Kolbe went echoing through Auschwitz. In that desert of hatred he had sown love. A survivor Jozef Stemler later recalled: ‘In the midst of a brutalization of thought, feeling and words such as had never before been known, man indeed became a ravening wolf in his relations with other men. And into this state of affairs came the heroic

self-sacrifice of Father Kolbe.’ Another survivor Jerzy Bielecki declared that Father Kolbe’s death was a shock filled with hope, bringing new life and strength. It was like a powerful shaft of light in the darkness of the camp.’



Two Lives
The Story of Divine Mercy



Two Lives

The Story of Divine Mercy

Saint Maximilian Maria Kolbe

Order of Friars Minor Conventual (1894-1941)

Rudolph Höss/Hoess

Commandant Auschwitz Extermination

Camp (1901-1947)

“This is a story of divine irony. A story of tragedy so enormous as to be incomprehensible. It leaves you standing silent, weeping with an aching sadness for the not to be forgotten millions, who suffered so much. It is a story, nevertheless, that leaves us somewhat shocked at the workings of Divine Mercy. But perhaps this truth should awaken in our hearts that small, infinitely powerful, bright, white-winged virtue called hope that flutters out of the maelstrom of soul-destroying dark memories.”

It is said that Psalm 1 in the Bible is a summary of the whole of Sacred Scripture. It outlines the way of virtue and the way of vice. You will not like what you read here because the focus is mainly on the way that leads to doom; but that it is all about the Divine Mercy.

AUSCHWITZ – puts these two men before our eyes, two born leaders, both died a violent death.

St Maximilian Kolbe, the Franciscan, who sought “to love everyone; to do good for everyone,” and who consecrated his life to the Immaculate Virgin Mary, even as far as dying in the Starvation Bunker Number 13 as prisoner 16670 in the Auschwitz Concentration Camp on August 14, 1941.

Rudolph Höss, the SS-Commander in charge of Auschwitz Concentration Camp, who sought to do his duty, with ruthless competence and efficiency. He died April 16, 1947 on the gallows overlooking the extermination camp, the place of his atrocities.

There were many – remarkable parallels between Höss and Kolbe from childhood onwards. Their fate was very much connected with one another although their way of life was certainly very different.

Both of them grew up in very religious Catholic families, both of them served with zeal as altar boys at Holy Mass, and both of them had the childhood wish to become a priest and a missionary. Above average intelligence and very sensitive, both of them were brought up to be obedient, to carry responsibility, to be brave and to be determined.

However, they made very opposite decisions in life. Fr. Maximilian Kolbe, a Conventual Franciscan Friar, in the end, became a radiant saint, with a deep Marian spirituality.

Rudolph Höss became a Nazi and one of the most hated criminals in history.

Both were very gifted in strategy and organizing, and both brilliantly developed their talents in their particular way.

As leading figures, both were responsible for millions of people. Rudolph Höss brought death to them; Fr. Maximilian Kolbe mediated eternal life. A young fellow prisoner in Auschwitz told of how Fr. Maximilian Kolbe wanted to convert the entire camp – including the Nazis. “He did not just pray for them, but also urged us to pray for their conversion. He also stated that no conversion is impossible!”

In the Nuremberg Trials, as well as in the Warsaw National Court, Höss confessed to being responsible for everything that happened under his command at the Auschwitz concentration camp.

The International Court condemned Rudolph Höss to death and sent him for execution to Poland. On July 30, 1946, He was transfer to Montelupich Prison in Krakow.

On April 2, 1947, Rudolf Höss was sentenced to death. On April 4, 1947 he was imprisoned in Wadowice. He heard the bells of a nearby Carmelite convent, not far from his prison cell and he remembered how he had stood at the altar as an altar boy and how becoming a priest had been his dream. Only then, was he suddenly touched by the realization of the terrible things he had done.

A few days before his execution in 1947, Rudolph Höss, one of the cruelest mass murderers in the course of history, repented and went to the Sacrament of Reconciliation

Conversion

Höss feared not death but torture, which he felt certain to receive at the hands of his Polish captors. After all, Auschwitz was in Poland. He was wholly confounded when he met with kindness instead. "I have to confess that I never would have expected to be treated so decently and so kindly in a Polish prison." The fact that several of the guards showed him their tattoos from Auschwitz further put him to shame. If persons whom he had caused such suffering could forgive him, then perhaps God could forgive him as well. A light opened in his mind; apathy evolved into deep-seated repentance and trust in God.

It is significant that he recognized the true gravity of his crimes through the kindness of the Polish guards. His soul responded to a ray of love. Nazi ideology taught him that Poles were sub-human. Now he understood them as beautiful persons whom he caused to suffer terribly.

In the solitude of my prison cell, I have come to the bitter recognition that I have sinned gravely against humanity...I caused unspeakable suffering for the Polish people in particular. I am to pay for this with my life. May the Lord God forgive one day what I have done. I ask the Polish people for forgiveness.

Reconciliation

By all appearances, Höss' repentance was sincere. On April 4, 1947, which was Good Friday that year, he asked that a priest might hear his confession. After several days of searching, the guards could unfortunately find no priest who knew enough German. Höss then recalled Fr. Władysław Lohn, the Jesuit whom he saved from death. This priest spoke fluent German. He wrote his name out and gave it to the guards. They found Fr. Władysław in Lagiewniki, where he was then serving as chaplain at the Shrine of Divine Mercy. This fact is momentous, as will be seen.

For Fr. Wladyslaw Lohn, this was an extraordinary irony since Höss had killed all the members of his Jesuit community. Fr. Lohn



*Group photograph of Polish Jesuits working in Rome.
Father Wladyslaw Lohn, Professor of Dogmatic Theology at the Gregorian
University is on the left.*

had tried to join his Jesuit brothers in Auschwitz by simply walking into the camp, but he was captured and brought before Rudolph Höss. The Commandant of Auschwitz was impressed by the priest's bravery and his ability to speak fluent German. However, he refused to grant this priest his pious wish, to join his Jesuit brothers. Instead of shooting him in the head; he had him thrown out of the concentration camp.

So, before he went to Rudolph Höss in his prison cell, Fr. Wladyslaw Lohn, went to obtain spiritual support from the convent where Saint Faustina Kowalska (1905-1938) had lived and received the revelations of Divine Mercy. One of the sisters later commented: "Fr. Lohn urgently requested prayer from everyone who was here in the convent at the time. He told us where he was called to go and what task he had been asked to fulfill. We entrusted everything to the mercy of Jesus."

It is nearly impossible to imagine how difficult a task it was for Fr. Wladyslaw to face Höss again, but on the Thursday of Easter Week – April 10, 1947, he went to the prison and spoke for several hours with Höss. At the end of the conversation, the former commander of Auschwitz made a profession of the Catholic

Faith and officially came back to the Church. Then Rudolph Höss received the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

On the following day – April 11, 1947 (two days before Divine Mercy Sunday), Fr. Wladyslaw Lohn brought the Holy Eucharist to the repentant Höss. On receiving Holy Communion, he knelt down in the middle of his cell and cried. Then as the priest was leaving, he said: **“God has forgiven me, but the people will never forgive me!”**

Years later, Fr. Lohn testified that he prepared Rudolph Höss for confession by speaking about Jesus’ Heart, the Heart, which Maximilian Kolbe wanted to lead all souls to through the heart of the Immaculate Virgin Mary.

On April 12, four days before his execution, Höss wrote a statement publicly asking the Polish nation for forgiveness. “My conscience compels me to make the following declaration. In the solitude of my prison cell, I have come to the bitter recognition that I have sinned gravely against humanity.

As Commandant of Auschwitz, I was responsible for carrying out part of the cruel plans of the “Third Reich” for human destruction. In so doing I have inflicted terrible wounds on humanity.

I caused unspeakable suffering for the Polish people in particular. I am to pay for this with my life. May the Lord God forgive one day what I have done”.

On the day of the execution the District Attorney recorded: “Rudolph Höss was completely calm right to the last moment.”

As mentioned before, Fr. Władysław Lohn was a Spiritual Director at the Shrine of Divine Mercy. This shrine had humble beginnings through the revelations that Jesus gave to a Polish nun, Sr. Faustina Kowalska. She belonged to the Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy from 1925 until her death in 1938, age 33.

Sr. Faustina wrote down Jesus’ various messages. Essentially, they reveal that God is ineffably merciful, but humankind must turn with trust in order to receive it. Without trust, mercy does not penetrate the human heart. Jesus instructed her to have an image painted with rays streaming from His breast, and likewise

to establish a 'Feast of Mercy' on the Sunday after Easter when He would pour out mercy in a special manner.

In our times, the Feast of Divine Mercy after Easter is a major event, Sr. Faustina is a canonized saint, and the Shrine where Fr. Władysław Lohn worked receives three million visitors a year. Pope St. John Paul II described the shrine as "the capital of the Divine Mercy devotion."

Conversely, Rudolf Höss described Auschwitz as "the largest killing center in all of history." It is one of history's great ironies that he who led the center of death should seek help from the capital of mercy.

God's Immeasurable Mercy

Rudolf Höss' conversion is quite unknown. What key lessons does his story provide? In the first place, the conscience can't be boxed without consequences and secondly, let no one ever despair of God's mercy. Höss would be forever a scoundrel if it were not for one fact alone: he opened his heart to the mercy of God. Unlike most of his colleagues, he owned up to his crimes.

If an Auschwitz commandant can lay claim to God's mercy then no one should ever despair. Jesus told St. Faustina, "Let the weak, sinful soul have no fear to approach Me, for even if it had more sins than there are grains of sand in the world, all will be drowned in the immeasurable depths of My mercy." (Diary, 1059)

Why did God grant Höss the grace of conversion? Could it be the seemingly insignificant act of mercy shown to Fr. Władysław? As Jesus said in the Beatitudes, "Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy." In conclusion, there is every reason to believe that Rudolf Höss will one day enjoy heavenly bliss after God has purified him, "for His mercy endures forever." (Ps 136:1)

In the Sacred Scripture Jesus declares: "This is my commandment: love one another as I love you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you." (John 15:12-14).

There is no doubt that St Maximilian prayed for Rudolph Höss. He prayed for all of their tormentors. He went further than this by urging his fellow prisoners to pray for their conversion. He went further, he gave his life into the hands of the Immaculate Virgin

Mary. In this his vision was focused towards heaven, because he understood that Mary is not only the Mediatrix of all Grace, but like Queen Ester of the Old Testament she pleads on behalf of all her people before the Throne of Majesty, with the good deeds of all her children. St Maximilian prayed and offered everything to the Sorrowful and Immaculate Virgin Mary because he believed that no conversion is impossible. This is the story of Divine Mercy.

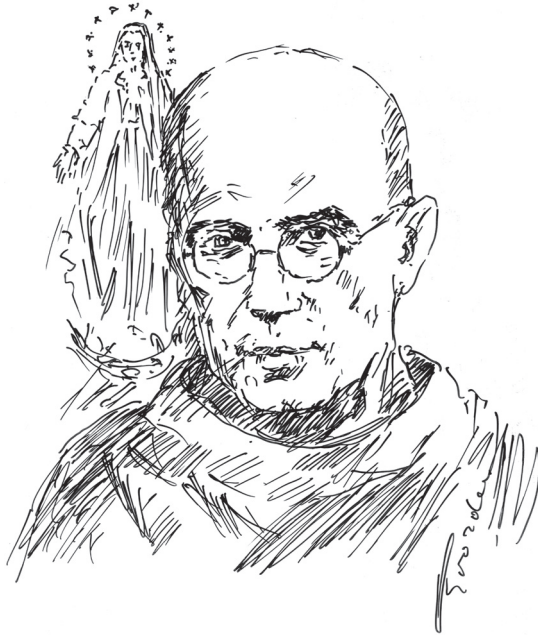
In September 1939, after the invasion of Poland by Hitler's armies, almost all the Franciscans of Niepokalanow had to leave their monastery. Before letting them go for an unknown destination - for exile, for others prison or death - Maximilian Kolbe said to them: "Do not forget love"

What you have read here about Saint Maximilian Kolbe is the bare bones of an incredibly active and amazing life. His rich Marian Spirituality, his incredible achievements, before Auschwitz Concentration Camp, are written up in many books.

Saint Maximilian Kolbe's body was cremated by the camp officials on the feast of the Assumption. He had stated years earlier: "I would like to be reduced to ashes for the cause of the Immaculata, and may this dust be carried over the whole world, so that nothing would remain."

O Immaculata,
Queen and Mother of the Church,
I renew my consecration to you for this day and for always, so
that you might use me
for the coming of the Kingdom of Jesus in the whole world.
To this end, I offer you
all my prayers, actions, and sacrifices of this day.

*Daily Consecration to Mary composed
by Saint Maximilian Maria Kolbe*



A Chronology of Saint Maximilian Maria Kolbe

- 1894 January 8: Raymond Kolbe is born at Zdunska Wola, the second son of Julius and Marianne (Dabrowska) Kolbe. The same day he was baptized in the parish church.
- 1902 June 29: Raymond receives his First Holy Communion in Pabianice, where the family had moved, looking for better work as weavers.
- 1907: Under the influence of the preaching of Fr. Peregrine Haczela, OFM CONV., during the parish mission in Pabianice, Raymond and Francis Kolbe enter the preparatory seminary of the Conventual Franciscans in Lwow.
- 1910 September 4: Despite the uncertainties about his calling Raymond receives the Franciscan habit from Fr. Peregrine Haczela, the Minister Provincial, and his name in the Order, Maximilian, at the novitiate in Lwow.

- 1911 September 5: Friar Maximilian professes his first, “simple” vows.
- 1912 November: Friar Maximilian is sent to the Order’s international seminary in Rome and begins the study of philosophy at the Jesuit Gregorian University.
- 1914 November 1: Friar Maximilian professes his “solemn” vows of poverty, chastity and obedience at the seminary of the Order in Rome.
- 1915 October 22: Friar Maximilian earns his doctorate in philosophy and begins his study of theology in the Pontifical Faculty of St. Bonaventure in Rome.
- 1917 January 20: On the seventy-fifth anniversary of the appearance of Mary to Alphonse Ratisbonne, during his meditation in the seminary chapel, Friar Maximilian resolves to establish a Marian organization.
- 1917: During a ball game Friar Maximilian suffers a hemorrhage indicating tuberculosis.
- 1917 October 16: Friar Maximilian establishes the Militia of the Immaculata (MI) with six other student friars of the Order’s seminary.
- 1918 April 28: Friar Maximilian is ordained a priest by Cardinal Basil Pompili, in the Church of Saint Andrea della Valle, Rome.
- 1918 April 29: Father Maximilian celebrates his first Mass in the Church of Saint Andrea della Fratte at the very altar where Our Lady appeared to Alphonse Ratisbonne in 1842.
- 1919 March 28: Pope Benedict XV blesses the MI by word of mouth at the request of Archbishop Dominic Jaquet.
- 1919 April 4: Fr. Dominic Tavani, Vicar General of the Order, bless and confirms the MI in writing.
- 1919 July 22: Fr. Maximilian obtains his doctorate in theology.
- 1919 July 29: He is assigned to the Order’s seminary in Krakow to teach Church history, beginning in October.
- 1919 December 20: Cardinal Adam Stephen Sapieha grants permission for diplomas (certificates) of the MI to be printed in Polish.
- 1920 August 10: Father Maximilian journeys to the Tatra Mountain City of Zakopane for treatment of tuberculosis

of the lungs and functions as chaplain for the “Climatic” Hospital. He is discharged on April 28, 1921.

- 1922 January 2: The MI is approved in Rome as a “Pious Union” by Cardinal Basil Pompilii, Vicar General of the Archdiocese of Rome.
- 1922 January: There appears the first issue of the Knight of the Immaculata with a press run of 5,000 copies.
- 1922 October 20: Father Maximilian is transferred to the friary of Grodno, where he continues as editor of the Knight and begins printing with the help of two brothers.
- 1926 September 18: He returns to Zakopane for treatment of tuberculosis again and remains until April 13, 1927.
- 1926 December 18: Pope Pius XI grants indulgences to the MI which is canonically erected in the International Seraphic College, San Teodoro, Rome.
- 1927 June and July: Father Maximilian meets Prince John Drucki-Lubecki to examine the possibility of obtaining land from the prince for a new friary and publishing house.
- 1927 August 6: Father Maximilian blesses a statue of the Immaculate Mother of God at Teresin near Warsaw in the land of the future friary.
- 1927 November 21: Father Maximilian and his brothers move with their equipment from Grodno to Niepokalanow, the “City of the Immaculata.”
- 1927 December 7: The Minister Provincial, Fr. Cornelius Czupryk, blesses the new foundation, which consists of two priests and eighteen professed brothers and candidates, of whom Father Maximilian is named guardian (superior).
- 1929 June 2: The Minister Provincial gives permission for the establishment of a minor seminary in Niepokalanow.
- 1930 February 26: Father Maximilian, prompted by a chance meeting with young Japanese, sets out for Japan to found another City of the Immaculata. He is accompanied by four Brothers, Zeno Zebrowski, Hilary Lysakowski, Sigmund Krol, and Severin (John) Dagus. He makes plans in Shanghai to found another City there.
- 1930 April 24: They arrive in Nagasaki, where Bishop Hayasaka permits them to publish a magazine on the

condition that Father Maximilian teach philosophy at the diocesan seminary.

- 1930 May 24: One month after their arrival the first issue of the Japanese Knight, *Seibo no Kishi*, is published with a press run of 10,000 copies.
- 1930 June and July: Father Maximilian returns to Poland across Siberia to attend the Provincial Chapter.
- 1930 July 24: He is reappointed superior of the Japanese mission and his brother, Alphonse, the guardian of Niepokalanow and editor of the Knight.
- 1930 December 3: Fr. Alphonse Kolbe, blood brother of Father Maximilian, dies in Warsaw hospital.
- 1931 March 4: Father Maximilian purchases land for a new friary in the poor district of Nagasaki-Hongochi at the base of Mt. Hikosan.
- 1931 May 16: The friars move to the new facility, which is named *Mugenzai no Sono* (Garden of the Immaculata).
- 1932 May to July: Father Maximilian voyages to India to arrange for another City in the near future.
- 1933 April and May: He returns to Poland for the Provincial Chapter after a stopover of three weeks in Rome.
- 1933 July 17-20: He attends the Provincial Chapter in Krakow, during which he remains as editor of the Japanese Knight and the general administrator of the MI for the whole world. The ex-provincial, Fr. Cornelius Czupryk, is named superior of the Japanese mission.
- 1936 April 16: A minor seminary is opened in the Japanese Garden of the Immaculata.
- 1936 May and June: Father Maximilian leaves Japan for good, returning for the Provincial Chapter in Krakow, where he is appointed guardian of Niepokalanow on July 16.
- 1936 December 8: At the urging of Father Maximilian the Conventual Franciscan Order consecrates itself to Mary Immaculate.
- 1938 February: At Niepokalanow he publishes the first issue of the Knight of the Immaculata, *Miles Immaculatae*, in Latin; this quarterly is meant to propagate the MI among the clergy.

- 1938 December 8: They inaugurate the radio transmitting station with a sermon by Father Maximilian on Station SP 3 RN.
- 1939 September 1: Poland is invaded by Nazi Germany and soon the 772 professed and candidate members were caught up in the war.
- 1939 September 19: Father Maximilian is arrested for the first time with thirty-five brothers, another priest and a Korean seminarian.
- 1939 December 8: Father Maximilian and the friars with him at Ostrzeszow are set free and return the next day to Niepokalanow.
- 1940 November 21: After several requests Father Maximilian is allowed to publish one issue of the Knight of the Immaculata with a press run of 120,000 copies, dated December 1940 – January 1941.
- 1941 February 17: He is arrested and taken to Pawiak Prison in Warsaw by the Gestapo where he is cruelly treated.
- 1941 May 28: Father Maximilian is transported in a trainload of prisoners to Oswiecim (Auschwitz) where is tattooed with the number 16670.
- 1941 July 28 – August 1: Between this five-day period Fritzs, the Commandant, sentences ten prisoners from Block 14 to death by starvation in retaliation for an escaped prisoner from their block. Father Maximilian's offer to die for one of the condemned, Francis Gajowniczek, is accepted. The condemned are placed in the basement bunker of Block 13.
- 1941 August 14: Father Maximilian is killed by an injection of lethal acid.
- 1941 August 15: His body is burned in the crematorium and according to his prediction, dispersed to the wind.
- 1969 January 30: Pope Paul VI declares Father Maximilian practiced heroic virtue and is worthy of the title "Venerable."
- 1971 June 14: The two miracles attributed to Ven. Maximilian are confirmed by Pope Paul VI and he is beatified on October 17 in St. Peter Basilica in Rome, by Pope Paul VI. (July 1948 Angela Testoni cured of tuberculosis of the intestines and

August 1950 Francis Ranier cured of calcification of the arteries/sclerosis)

- 1982 October 10: Pope John Paul II, in a huge ceremony in St. Peter's square, declares his compatriot a "Saint", a martyr of charity.

This timeline is a condensation derived from the Polish Knight, Rycerz Niepokalanej, September, 1982

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Across Poland, thousands of priests died in prisons and concentration camps; thousands of churches and monasteries were confiscated, closed or destroyed and priceless works of religious art and sacred objects were lost forever. Church leaders were targeted as part of an overall effort to destroy the Polish culture.

In 1940, Hitler proclaimed: "Poles may have only one master – a German. Two masters cannot exist side by side, and this is why all members of the Polish intelligentsia must be killed."

Between 1939 and 1945, an estimated 3,000 members (18%) of the Polish clergy, were murdered, of these, 1,992 died in concentration camps. Thousands were killed by Soviets. 3,563 Polish Priests survived concentration camps, prisons, and repression. Their blood is the seed of priestly vocations and I am one of them.

Fr. George J. Bobowski