

Letter of the Minister General of the Conventual Franciscan Order

ST. MAXIMILIAN KOLBE: HIS PROPHETIC VISION CONTINUES

2016 and 2017 are particularly significant years regarding the legacy left to us by St. Maximilian Kolbe. These years, respectively, mark the 75th anniversary of his martyrdom, and the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Militia of the Immaculate (MI). I think it is important to take a moment to reflect on the Martyr of Charity of Auschwitz, in order to find inspiration and motivation to enrich the life of our Order. His word and his example should be valued and put into practice because even today they can provide the Friars Minor Conventual with fresh ideas for their interior and apostolic growth.

The martyrdom of charity experienced in daily life - holiness of life and mission

The Saint makes us realize that it is possible to achieve a high degree of charity on one's daily spiritual path by carrying out continuous and effective acts of love—perhaps unseen by most people, but certainly valid. Throughout his life, Kolbe experimented, in different ways, with the dimensions of the gift of oneself. Before his death in Auschwitz, he had undertaken a journey marked by a remarkable and clear call to offer up his own life, an offering that manifested itself in the acceptance of painful episodes, harbingers of an even greater charity, one that was exemplary and resistant to hardship and persecution. He is known in particular for the martyrdom he suffered at the extermination camp in Auschwitz. However, this event was only the culmination of his journey of love and sorrow which he offered for Christ, the Church, the friars and the Kingdom. These expressions of his are significant: "Let us remember that love lives and is nourished by sacrifices. Let us thank the Immaculata for inner peace, for the ecstasy of love, but let us not forget that all of that, though good and beautiful, is not the essence of love and love, indeed, perfect love, may even exist without all that. The summit of love is the state in which Jesus came to find himself on the cross when he said, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me". There is no love without sacrifice" (KW 503).

Being a great son of Francis, the Polish Saint loved to meditate on the mystery of Christ. The Lord's love had a particular attraction for him, because it really put him in the spirit of someone who wants to learn how to love following the footsteps of the Redeemer. Contemplating Christ, you can make life a miracle of love, in every situation and in every event of our existential journey. St. Maximilian teaches us not to be afraid to love and to give of ourselves generously because only in this way can the charity of the Lord be seen in everything we do. This was the case, for example, with the martyrdom of Blessed Miguel Tomaszek (1960-1991) and Blessed Zbigniew Strzałkowski (1958-1991). They were killed in Peru by Shining Path revolutionaries and were proclaimed blessed on December 5, 2015. The witness of these Franciscan friars found a relative bench mark in the example that Kolbe set.

Miracles of love are possible, according to the experience of St. Maximilian, when we rely on the intercession and mediation of the Immaculate. In an article from 1924 he states: "Rekindle love and trust in Mary Immaculate everywhere and you shall soon see tears flowing from the eyes of the most hardened sinners. You shall see prisons emptied, the ranks of honest workers increased; while home hearths will be redolent of virtue; peace and happiness will destroy discord and pain, for it will be already a new era" (KW 1069).

Pope Francis, in his Angelus of August 14, 2016, offered this significant prayer in reference to the charity of Maximilian: "Let us ask the Virgin Mary to pray with us and for us to the Heavenly Father, that he dispense upon all believers the Holy Spirit, the divine flame which warms hearts and

helps us to be in solidarity with the joys and the sufferings of our brothers and sisters. May we be sustained on our journey by the example of St Maximilian Kolbe, martyr of charity, whose feast day is today: may he teach us to live the fire of love for God and for our neighbor."

The foundation, nature and mission of the MI

It was really the desire to love in the style of Christ, and to experience the richness of entrusting oneself to Mary, that gave rise to the MI in 1917. This Marian movement was the solution Kolbe and his companions found to address the delicate social, political, economic and religious situation of their day. The Marian association that Kolbe and his six companions founded was the prophetic vision that was put forward as an element to resolve and propel through the great darkness humanity was enduring in that period.

Maximilian was not afraid of novelty, in fact it launched him into new forms of apostolate, supported and driven by the strength that emanates from God. He imagined the MI as a mission that could reach the hearts of all men, surpassing previous models of associations. He desired that the MI "be less 'transcendentalis' than 'universalis', that is to say, it should not present itself as one more organization among the many that already exist, but rather deeply permeate all organizations" (KW 658). According to Kolbe, a movement that was born by listening to the voice of the Spirit and which lives by entrusting oneself to the Immaculate cannot be constrained and is called to be "woven into" every part of the ecclesial and social fabric. Indeed, "the purpose of the Militia of the Immaculata is to conquer the whole world, all hearts and each person individually, for the Queen, not only of Heaven, but also of the Earth. To give true happiness to those poor unfortunates who seek it in the ephemeral pleasures of this world, this is our aim" (KW 97).

Today the MI is called to important enterprises in evangelism in keeping with its history, its journey and especially with its distinctly missionary vocation. I have been following the path of the Kolbean association with great care and attention and-with satisfaction, too. I note some initiatives that are proving to be particularly innovative and fruitful from the apostolic point of view. These are evangelization schools in Poland which are particularly popular with young people who, through a progressive catechetical path, are able to come face to face with the Kolbean charism. In addition, I should mention the increasingly enthusiastic participation of young MI members in World Youth Day. It's a very significant change: In many countries the Kolbean Association is being rediscovered as something well-suited for young people-to the point that a World Day for young MI members has been called for 2018.

Love was the driving force that animated the Saint's whole missionary journey. Evangelization, mission, martyrdom-everything came from a heart that loved in the light of the contemplation of the Lord, a Lord who gives generously, without limits or boundaries. Kolbe said: "Your personal sanctification is your first occupation. Commitment toward the sanctification of others must be the overabundance of your love toward Jesus" (KW 987F). The Saint, with his spiritual experience, shows that you can achieve great apostolic goals if you express charity in your daily life through concrete and tangible acts.

The celebration of the 100th anniversary of the foundation of the MI

The message and testimony of Kolbe are still very current and in this "favorable time" our Order and the MI are called to discover the relevance of his prophecy in the mission. The mission is not exempt from persecution as it witnesses the Gospel in contexts that are secularized and hostile to the Christian message and its apostolic journey. In this spirit, the MI, with the Government of the Order present, began preparing for the 100th anniversary of its foundation with a Marian Congress

held in Fatima on October, 28-30, 2016. Its evocative and meaningful theme is: With Mary from the Mission to Martyrdom: The Secret of St. Maximilian Kolbe. On October 16-18, 2017, in Rome, the centennial will be solemnly celebrated with timely moments for prayer, discussion and festivities. The year 2017 shall be a Kolbean Year for the entire Order, with opportunities to reflect on the legacy of Kolbe in the Church, in the Order and in the context of the New Evangelization, as suggested by a motion made at the last General Chapter. In fact, on October 19-20, 2017, there will be a convention of the Order in Rome with friars from all over the world participating. We will try to learn how to implement the Saints missionary and martyrial witness in our own life and times, certain that his prophetic vision is not worn out and still has much to say and to give. May we experience this Kolbean Jubilee Year with great interior joy and with a greater emphasis on listening. We have a wonderful spiritual patrimony. It can be the basis for new itineraries suggested by the Holy Spirit to benefit the Church and humanity and that the Order and the MI, in profound communion, may want to develop. Like Kolbe, in addition to Kolbe, under the creative influence of the Holy Spirit, we are invited to discover new avenues of mission that can speak to the hearts of the men and women of our time.

Friar Marco Tasca
Minister General OFM Conv.
MI International Spiritual Assistant
