

PART 6

**With Mary on a Mission:
St. Maximilian Kolbe's Missionary Way**

(This reflection may be divided into two parts)

"Everywhere Is Love!"

"Scrutinizing with ecstatic admiration the divine plan of salvation, whose origin is the Father who freely willed to communicate to creatures the divine life of Jesus Christ revealed wondrously in Mary Immaculate, Father Kolbe, fascinated and enraptured, exclaims: 'Everywhere is love' (KW 1291). The gratuitous love of God is the answer to all doubts. 'God is love,' says St. John (1Jn 4:8)".

These words, pronounced by Pope St. John Paul II during his homily of December 8, 1982, at Santa Maria Maggiore, two months after the canonization of Father Kolbe, hold the key to understanding *mission* in the perspective embraced and lived by St. Maximilian.

Mission, in fact, it is all about love: the "excessive" love of God the Father who dreams of the happiness of every creature and gives His Son for us (cf. Jn 3:16). It is about the "excessive" love of Christ, who became man for us in Mary's womb, let His Heart be pierced on the Cross to quench our dry and hard hearts with the living Water of His Spirit, with His Body broken and his Blood poured forth for us (Jn 19:17-37). It is about the humble love of the young woman of Nazareth, who offered her womb and heart to God in the abandonment of faith, so that in time and in history He could realize this plan of salvation and love (cf. Lk 1:26 -38).

With the depth of the mystics and saints, Maximilian, follower of St. Francis, understood that the infinite love of the Triune God for humanity was fully revealed through Jesus Christ. In the mystery of the Incarnation and the Cross, God humbled Himself, became poverty, weakness, flesh. The Lord Jesus stripped/emptied Himself of everything and surrendered to our hands (cf. Phil 2:6-7): He is totally-given Love. "Therefore, when Christ came into the world, He said: Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. Then I said, Here I am—it is written about me in the scroll—I have come to do your will, my God" (cf. Heb 10:5-7).

St. Maximilian, however, did not forget that the mystery of this "emptying" took place in the womb of Mary, as St. Paul reminds us: "When the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law" (Gal 4:4). For a special gift of grace, we could say for a unique "charism," Maximilian was allowed to grasp and accept with great clarity the mystery and mission of Mary in God's plan.

For Maximilian, Mary is not only the creature whom God chose as His Mother to enter into the world: she is the Immaculata, the new Woman, the redeemed humanity dreamed of by God. She is, even today, the Mother of God who became man, called to continue to work with the Holy Spirit in generating the Son in the hearts of men.

*"... And the Word was made flesh (Jn 1:14) as the result of the love of God and the Immaculata. So He became the firstborn, the Man-God, and souls are not reborn in Christ by any other way, other than through the love of God and toward the Immaculata and in the Immaculata."*¹

¹ KW 1296. The abbreviation KW refers to the numeric order used in the English edition of *The Writings of St. Maximilian Maria Kolbe*, Nerbini International, Lugano, 2016.

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He realized that, *both in the mission of the Son*—that of revealing the face of the Father and making us share in His divine sonship, *as in that of the Spirit*—that of forming in the image of Jesus all the children of God, God the Father has entrusted to Mary a very specific mission: to be the Mother of the Son of God made man and the Mother of all men called to be members of His Mystical Body, the Church.

Maximilian wrote: “...it is the task of the Holy Spirit to form until the end of the world the new members of the Mystical Body of Christ, but... this work is accomplished with Mary, in Mary and through Mary”²; “In Mary’s womb the soul must be reborn according to Jesus Christ’s pattern.”³

From the prolonged and vital contemplation of the dynamics of this plan of love, Maximilian, as a young student in Rome and then increasingly in the years of his Franciscan religious life and of his priestly ministry, deepened that passion for the glory of God, for the coming of the Kingdom of the Heart of Jesus, for the conversion and sanctification of every person that became the driving force of his whole existence.

In his desire to attract all men to God’s love, Maximilian Kolbe understood that *the first fundamental priority* of the Church’s mission is to imitate the Lord Jesus, the Missionary of the Father *par excellence*, to do as He did, that is, *emptying ourselves in the womb of the same mother, Mary*.

Therefore Fr. Maximilian, going straight to the essence of things, realized that the *strength of the mission* consists in *belonging totally to Mary*, in striving to be like her, to become her (cf. KW 508 and 1210), to allow her divine Spouse, the Holy Spirit, the main Protagonist of mission, to continue to bring Christ into the world through us.

This Marian perspective was echoed in the recent ecclesial Magisterium, in the thought of Pope St. John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI who wrote as follows: “The Church is not an apparatus; she is not simply an institution... She is a Woman. She is a mother. She is alive. The Marian understanding of the Church is the most decisive antithesis to a merely organizational and bureaucratic concept of Church. We cannot make the Church; we have to be the Church... It is only in being Marian that we become Church. In the beginning, the Church... was born when the ‘fiat’ emerged from the soul of Mary. This is the deepest desire of the Council: that the Church is awakened in our souls. Mary shows us the way.”⁴

A Winning Strategy

In the light of what was said above, before reflecting on Fr. Kolbe’s missionary approach, it is important to emphasize the ingenious simplicity of his *missionary strategy*, the essence of which is primarily being animated by a passionate and exciting “obsession”: the desire to get closer to Mary, to belong more and more to her, to *become Mary*, the Immaculata, the creature in whom the Plan of God is fully realized, to “let fly more and more the wings of love”⁵ for God and the neighbor, letting her continue through us to give birth to Jesus in the heart of every person.

In other words, Maximilian understood (like all the saints!) that to collaborate in the universal plan of salvation first of all it is necessary to put ourselves out there! More than methods, means, initiatives... the mission needs people! Mission requires that each of us choose, freely and decisively, to welcome the love of God, to follow Jesus and to offer Him his or her life (cf. Rom 12:1-2), to be a witness of His love, an instrument in His hands, a servant of the truth. Like Mary, we are to be ready to say, “I am the Lord’s servant. May your word to me be fulfilled” (Lk 1:38).

For this purpose he founded the Militia of the Immaculata (MI): certainly not to set up another Catholic organization, but to give life to a missionary movement, an association of people who choose

² KW 1229.

³ KW 1295.

⁴ J. Ratzinger, *Die Ekklesiologie des Zweiten Vatikanumus*, in IKZt 15 (1986), pp. 41-52, cit. in Brendan Leahy, *Il principio mariano nella Chiesa*, Città Nuova Editrice, p. 216.

⁵ Cf. KW 1284.

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to “consecrate themselves completely to the Immaculate Virgin, placing themselves freely as a docile and generous instrument in her hands” (see the MI Original Program), in order to cooperate in the conversion and sanctification of themselves and of all men. The MI is an association of people who, together and unreservedly consecrated to Mary, live and love, suffer and rejoice, work in any environment and situation in communion of life with her, making her visible in the world.

That is why reaching out and inviting more and more people to belong to the MI was the goal relentlessly pursued by Fr. Maximilian. It was not so much to swell the ranks of adherents to his association, but to contribute as quickly as possible to pursuing *“the happiness of all mankind in God through the Immaculata,”*⁶ allowing her to continue her maternal and universal mission everywhere, as soon as possible, through the humble and generous presence of more and more MI “Knights”.

MI members are people of every age, condition and state of life, present *“everywhere, but particularly in the most important places, such as: 1) youth education (professors of scientific institutes, teachers, sports clubs); 2) the management of public opinion (magazines, newspapers, their drafting and dissemination, public libraries, circulating libraries, etc., conferences, movies, cinemas, etc.). 3) fine arts (sculpture, painting, music, theater); and finally 4) Knights of the Immaculata in every field should become the pioneers and leaders in science (natural sciences, history, literature, medicine, law, exact sciences, etc.).”*⁷

He continued this way: *“With the assistance of the MI, industrial complexes, businesses, banks, etc., should arise and develop. In a word, the Militia should permeate everything, and in a healthy spirit heal, strengthen, and develop all to the greater glory of God through the Immaculata and for the good of humanity.”*⁸

This was St. Maximilian’s missionary dream! These were the new horizons that attracted his eyes! His missionary strategy could be summed up in a threefold program:

1. to be converted and to evangelize oneself at the school of Mary;
2. to evangelize others, through example, word and the generous gift of self;
3. to call and to form new evangelizers.

In the Footsteps of Mary, the First Missionary

“At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah’s home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: ‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill His promises to her!’ And Mary said: ‘My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for He has been mindful of the humble state of His servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed’” (Lk 1:39-48).

What transparency of the Holy Spirit had to fill the person of Mary, if her greeting made Elizabeth in turn be filled by it, so she recognized in her young relative the Mother of the Lord? What fullness of grace was to flood the heart of Mary if just her greeting could convey the presence of the Savior and make the Precursor leap for joy in the womb of His mother?

This Gospel passage, in which Luke describes the visit of Mary to Elizabeth, reveals the missionary soul of Mary, which exercised a strong attraction on Maximilian Kolbe, to the point of inspiring him “to become herself living, speaking, acting in this world,”⁹ to become a missionary of Jesus in the world.

⁶ KW 1088.

⁷ KW 92.

⁸ Ib.

⁹ Cf. KW 486.

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St. Maximilian's missionary manner, in fact, was born here: from the daily contemplation of Mary, the Woman of the Gospel, this great and humble Woman, who walked the dusty roads of her land carrying God in the heart and singing her *Magnificat*; this Woman who, as we read in the great conciliar document on lay apostolate, "While leading the life common to all here on earth, one filled with family concerns and labors, was always intimately united with her Son and in an entirely unique way cooperated in the work of the Savior"¹⁰; this strong Woman who advanced in her pilgrimage of faith¹¹ repeating her *fiat* to the Will of God in all the seasons of her life, under the Cross... and beyond!

Kolbe's missionary approach everywhere (in Rome, in his country, in Japan) wanted to be a reflection of Mary's manner: a manner at the same time interior and practical, spiritual and active.

Maximilian, living ever more intensely and radically his belonging to the Immaculata, his total consecration to her, learned and embraced Mary's dispositions in relation to God and neighbor, those attitudes which Pope Paul VI summarized and described in his unequalled apostolic exhortation *Marialis Cultus*, which presents Mary as the *Virgin in prayer*, the *attentive Virgin*, the *Virgin Mother* and the *Virgin presenting offerings*.¹²

The first typical attitude of Mary that Father Maximilian contemplated and embraced by living in communion with her, is certainly that of prayer, the intimate union with the Triune God, who made Kolbe a *contemplative in action*.

His words about prayer reflect his beliefs, but above all his experience: "*Prayer is a means that people do not know about, and yet it is the most effective way to restore peace in the soul, to give them happiness, because it serves to bring them closer to God's love. Prayer revives the world. Prayer is the indispensable condition for the regeneration and the life of every soul. By means of prayer, St. Thérèse de Lisieux, without leaving the walls of her convent, became the patron of all missions and not only the titular patron saint, as experience shows. Let us pray, let us pray well, pray much, both with our lips and in our thought, and we shall experience in ourselves how the Immaculata will take increasing possession of our souls, how our belonging to her will deepen more and more in every respect, how our sins will vanish, and our flaws will weaken, how gently and powerfully we will come ever closer to God... To the extent in which we burn more and more with divine love, we will kindle a similar love even in others.*"¹³

Regarding Maximilian we could say what Celano wrote about the Seraphic Father Francis, namely that he was "not so much praying as becoming himself a prayer."¹⁴

The second inner attitude of Mary, the attentive Virgin, which characterized the whole missionary experience of Father Kolbe, was definitely *obedient attention to God*, who manifests His will through Scripture, the Church, interior inspirations and life circumstances...

Several letters highlight how *obedience of faith* was the secret, the compass, of each of his missionary initiatives, that he undertook always and only after being validated by the voice of obedience.

Here is what he wrote in 1931 from Mugenzai no Sono to the seminarians of Niepokalanów: "*You yourself will experience in your lives, even on this earth, that all of the perfection of holiness, all the fervor of action, all the usefulness of the missionary ministry consists not in great wisdom, nor in great intelligence, nor in great skills or even in the amount of prayers and penitence, but solely in the perfection of Holy Obedience. Why is this? Because through Holy Obedience the certain will of God, the will of the Immaculata manifest themselves; through Holy Obedience we truly become an instrument in her hands....*"¹⁵

¹⁰ *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 4/o.

¹¹ Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 58.

¹² Cf. *Marialis Cultus*, 17-20.

¹³ KW 903.

¹⁴ Cf. 2Cel 95.

¹⁵ KW 380.

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The third attitude of Mary, the Virgin Mother, that Maximilian was able to translate into his life is *love-charity*: love that becomes self-gift, that becomes hands, feet, arms, eyes placed at the service of others with the simplicity and genuineness of a mother. This evangelical love was first of all addressed to his confreres, in the reality of everyday life. It was a love that involved listening, acceptance, involvement, participation, appreciation of the other. An example: in a letter dated 1936¹⁶ (written after his return to Poland from the Japanese mission) Maximilian, guardian of the city-friary of Niepokalanów, tells us that in his daily program he has reserved the morning for listening to the confreres who need consult him, and then the afternoon (and often the night) to go visit each person in his workplace. Even during the periods of increased activity, he found time to pay particular attention to the sick and those who were experiencing suffering.¹⁷

However, toward those who caused him grief and difficulties of various kinds he tried to have concrete attitudes of understanding, patience and forgiveness.¹⁸ His gracious efforts extended literally to every person he met, without distinction (believers and non-believers, Jews, Buddhists, fellow detainees or Nazi guards...). Any situation or circumstance was always providential in his eyes: on the train or in the sanatorium, during missionaries travels in his country or abroad, in a customs office where he was waiting for the paperwork processing or through the newspaper's pages, in the confessional, or in the middle of the camp barracks.

Finally, the most difficult step of this interior assimilation of the missionary manner of Mary, the Virgin presenting offerings, was the *willingness to offer day by day his life* for others, for God, the willingness to experience *suffering out love*.¹⁹ Daily contemplation of the active participation of Mary in the Mystery of the Cross made him ready to embrace suffering and pain (physical, spiritual and emotional) as a valuable and effective means for collaborating with Christ in the salvation of the world.

*"Let us remember that love lives of and requires sacrifices. ... When love for her, for the goodness of God in her, the love of the divine Heart personified in her, when that love will have taken hold of us, and penetrated us, then the sacrifices will become a necessity for our souls."*²⁰ *"Love of the Immaculata consists not only in an act of consecration, even if is recited with great fervor, but in suffering many hardships and working for her unceasingly. Yet everything if, when, how and to the extent she herself wants."*²¹

Collaborating in Her Maternal Mission

This interior manner has given an equally Marian character to his work and the initiatives undertaken. Maximilian is well known as the creator and founder of newspapers and magazines, founder of the City-friary of Niepokalanów (City of the Immaculata) in Poland and Japan, but we should emphasize *the Marian manner* that animated and characterized these apostolic achievements, particularly highlighting three aspects:

1. passion for others
2. dialogue
3. the gift of self

1. Maximilian, in responding to his missionary call, made a precise, decisive choice. In current terms we would say that *he put man at the center of his missionary action*, man created in the image and likeness of God, *man with his thirst for happiness, truth and love*; he wanted to reach people *in a hurry*, where they were, to introduce the Immaculata in the heart of every person, so that conquered by her for Christ, they would discover their own high dignity as children of God and feel themselves directly

¹⁶ Cf. KW 678.

¹⁷ Cf. KW 798; 699; 774; 128.

¹⁸ Cf. KW 350; 351; 354; 487.

¹⁹ See Unpublished Conference, Aug. 28, 1939.

²⁰ KW 504.

²¹ KW 706.

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involved in the same mission: to win every person for God through the Immaculata. To realize this plan as quickly as possible Kolbe employed the press, started to use the radio and wanted to use cinema, theater... any lawful means!

In the 1930s, when Father Kolbe decided to travel to Japan in response to the exhortation of Pope Pius XI and of his Minister General, Fr. Alfonso Orlini, who called for evangelization of the world, Catholic missions were linked to a well-defined territory and organized into specific structures: parishes, prefectures and dioceses, normally assigned to a single religious institution, which generally undertook the building churches, schools and hospitals.

Kolbe approached his missionary working thinking “out of the box,” out of the classical patterns of his time. Establishing the new Japanese mission, in a land where Catholics were a minority, Maximilian considered the whole nation as a mission territory. He chose to invest his energies in evangelization and formation of consciences, in the commitment to *enlighten minds* with the splendor of Truth and to *inflare hearts*²² with the fire of the Gospel, following the example and with the mediation and guidance of the Immaculate Mother of God and Mediatrix of grace.

This is why, with the help of translators (not only Catholics but also Protestants, Buddhists, Shinto) he devoted himself to publishing a newspaper in Japanese language, the *Knight of the Immaculata*, which in December 1930 reaches the print run of 25,000 copies. His was a difficult and courageous choice to privilege the spiritual works of mercy, directed to man’s eternal salvation, that would not allow him to easily measure his results, but that reflected Mary’s maternal manner.

In that context, in fact, Maximilian realized that the community of Mugenzai no Sono would be called to witness to the “Gospel of charity,” but also to offer to Japanese brothers and sisters the “charity of the Gospel” in an appropriate way, communicating Christian values, sharing with them the new Life and working for its growth, until they reached the full maturity of Christ.

2. If we think back to the short intense life of Maximilian, we can easily imagine him always engaged in dialogue with others: with university students in Krakow, with the other patients in Zakopane, with state officials, with fellow prisoners, even with his tormentors in Auschwitz. Maximilian was aware that the first manner of evangelizing is the *personal contact with other*. “A poor way which does not need many tools, but yet is very effective,” as the Italian Bishops stated in their letter *L’amore di Cristo ci sospinge*, in April 1999. “A poor, but not easy, way, because it demands to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have (cf. 1 Pt 3:15) through a daily and wide testimony, through relationships faithful to the Gospel, full of meaning on a personal, family and community level.” And St. Maximilian, as a brother and a friend, like the Good Samaritan in the parable, as a mother, as the blessed Mother, knew how to be close, to listen to, to be compassionate, to console, to enlighten and to talk with candor and respect.

3. A time comes, perhaps for all of us, when we realize that words are no longer enough to express and witness Love. Jesus used these words to prepare his disciples to understand where the mission that was entrusted to them was to lead them: “There is no greater love than *to lay down one’s life ... Love one another ... so that the world may believe*” (cf. Jn 15-17). Fr. Maximilian learned from Jesus, Mary, St. Paul, St. Francis, that we are missionaries when and in so much we are ready, day by day, to give our lives, to spend and consume them for love, with love, like a mother. Maximilian had been training for this throughout his lifetime. He understood the logic of Jesus: “Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit” (Jn 12:24), and he followed it immediately, letting himself be led day-to-day by Mary, by the Holy Spirit, making it his rule of life. And so he was a missionary and finally a martyr, which means a witness of Christ's charity.

In the Spiritual Exercises’ notes of 1937 we find a very short sentence: “*Da teipsum aliis = amor (Give*

²² Cf. KW 382.

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yourself to others = love)."²³ A short sentence that contains the whole mystery of a lifetime.

Questions for discussion:

- Will we accept the legacy that St. Maximilian entrusts to us:
to be missionaries like Mary, attentive to the signs of times, the needs of the world, in the most diverse realities and to become a reflection of the goodness and mercy of God's tenderness?

Commitment in our life:

To be consecrated to Mary without limit or to renew our consecration to her with refreshed zeal.
To become part of the MI and to participate in its mission in the Church and the world.

²³ Cf. KW 983.