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**SAINT MAXIMILIAN KOLBE'S WITNESS
FOR TODAY AND TOMORROW'S WORLD**

Welcoming address at the opening of the Congress on Saint Maximilian Kolbe,
Rome-Seraphicum, September 24th 2001

I was kindly invited to give a welcoming address at this International Congress, dedicated to the personality and the writings by Saint Maximilian Kolbe. I received this invitation with joy and feel honored about beginning the works of the Congress.

I feel particularly close to Saint Maximilian Maria Kolbe because he honored, in an exceptional way, my people and my homeland. Christian Poland has given birth to various Saints to the Church and to the world, but I believe that in modern times Saint Maximilian represents the individual who in a most eloquent way illustrated the deep roots and vitality of the values of Christian faith in culture and in the history of my nation.

Saint Maximilian, while being rooted in the Polish culture and Church, represents a personality that attracts attention and incites admiration even outside of Poland and even in non-Catholic and non-Christian areas, because of his witness of life and his heroic death. In today's global and globalized world, his figure crosses Catholic boundaries and imposes itself on the world. He exerted his fascination in a universal range even before his beatification and canonization. For many believers and non-believers today, he is still the heroic Father Kolbe.

The Catholic Church worships him as confessor of the faith inserted in a great and bright Franciscan spiritual and theological tradition. His never-ending apostolate, alive since childhood, in fact, buried its roots in the core of the Franciscan vision of the Primacy and centrality of Jesus Christ in human history, as well as in the Franciscan concept of Mary's predestination as Mother of the Son of God made flesh and spiritual Mother of the Mystical Body that is the Church.

The commitment to spread the Kingdom of Christ among men and to bring souls to the sincere and affectionate devotion to Mary as the means chosen by God to achieve His Plan for salvation.

His ardent missionary commitment in the Christian environment and in non-Christian contexts, like the Japanese and the Indian, finds its motivation and adequate explanation only in the zeal for Christ and for Mary, in view of the full realization of the glory of God and the salvation of men. His missionary witness remains up to date even today, the era of Inter-religious dialogue. The respect for the non-Christian religions, today alive in

the Christian environment, was practiced by him with a deep conviction, as witnessed by his cordial dialogue with the Buddhists in Japan. This, however, did not block his desire to lead all to the fullness of the gift of God's salvation, offered in full consciousness and adhesion to faith in the universal Mediator and His Mother, intimately associated with the saving mission of the Redeeming Son in the plans of God the Trinity.

Saint Maximilian is for the Church and for the world a martyr, rather, a witness for the gift of love made real in the offering of one's life for another brother. With his death for another, in the place of another, he entered the path of Christ who gave Himself for us all, for each of us, and in the path of the Redeemer's teaching, which reveals that there is no greater love than that of giving one's life for others (cf. Jn 15:13).

His martyrdom/witness has a range that goes clearly beyond the appreciation by the Christian Community. Because of this, he is honored also by non-believing men and women. With martyrdom, he became a credible witness of the civilization of love, of that giving love that breaks through the circle of self-preservation and closing into one's egotistical self, asserting the face and the needs of the other, who calls out with his presence and needs. This is one of the most felt anthropological problems during these years with many wars, exploitations and injustices. Often however, these problems are formulated and discussed prevalently at a theoretical level. Saint Maximilian faces this question if a practical way, concrete and therefore truly credible. Thus, with his example, he represents one of the most expressive witnesses of humanity for mankind in the third millennium of the Christian era. In fact, the love he taught, he coherently achieved, even in situations of extreme difficulty, even at the cost of life.

The last decades philosophy, theology and narrative have asked if philosophy, theology and telling man, the human being, are feasible, after the horrors of Auschwitz as well as the Gulags, Maoist China, Cambodia, the Balkan nations and other parts of the world. Many answers are lined with skepticism, pessimism and giving in to the non-sense of man and of God even, seen as an impotent spectator facing such enormous catastrophes for humanity. Saint Maximilian, with the gift of his life for another - supported by faith in the God of life, in the resurrected Christ and in the Assumption of the Virgin Mary (this gift was made right on the eve of that feast day dedicated to Her) - opens the hearts of men to hope in life beyond this world, branded by violence and by death, and to faith that dares to believe that God, in the mystery of His way, is capable of inciting life and salvation even with the horrendous destructions enacted by man. And without a doubt, this is the strength of his witness for today and tomorrow's world.

I can see that revisiting his life and his writings will be achieved by this Congress with this perspective in view.

I hope that this may contribute to a greater and clearer worth of the pre-eminent dimension of this Saint in the construction of the Church's and the World's future, in fraternity and solidarity, which make up the most beautiful fruits and most concrete ones for the salvation that Jesus Christ brought and continues to offer to all of humanity during the course of history.

To all the Relators, organizers, auditors and participants at this International Congress, I bid good and fruitful work. .

