

5TH INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS  
 MAXIMILIAN KOLBE DURING HIS TIME AND TODAY  
 AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO HIS PERSONALITY AND TO HIS WRITINGS

SAINT MAXIMILIAN MARIA KOLBE'S SPIRITUAL ITINERARY

*Fr. Jesús Castellano Cervera Ocd*

**Introduction**

I approach the figure of Saint Maximilian M. Kolbe with a certain amount of trepidation and fondness. With apprehension, first of all, because I do not feel capable of achieving a specific approach to him in a Congress where specialists on the matter are called upon. With fondness, at the same time, because the person is truly extraordinary, his writings numerous, his fascination universal, his end heroic. However, I confess that it is difficult for me to grasp the richness of his writings and the synthesis of his spiritual figure.

Therefore, I approach his figure with the humility and with the desire to offer a contribution to this interdisciplinary dialogue, from the point of view of Spiritual Theology and spirituality. I would like this approach to be specific and harmonious with the reports of the Congress; in a specific way, I would like to offer a contribution from the point of view of my specialization, which is the spirituality of the XX Century, what is called contemporary spirituality. Because of this, I wanted to also make a premise an approach to his presence in the spirituality of the XX Century since the theme proposed to me was the spiritual itinerary of the Saint.

In fact, Maximilian is an individual with XX Century spirituality; he shares certain aspects of this to the point of being rightfully located among the great witnesses and teachers of spirituality during the first half of the XX Century, because of his experience and his doctrine, and among the individuals emerging after the Council, from his beatification and canonization, because of his lively presence in the Church during the last decades of the XX Century, because of his exemplarity, his spiritual and apostolic heredity, the plurality of his ecclesial influence.

The specific reference to his *spiritual itinerary* allows us to compare ourselves also with the great theme of spirituality, with the spiritual path, with the itinerary of holiness, with the dynamism of grace.

This too is a classic theme of Christian spirituality, proposed in a different way on the theoretical level, but fundamentally lived by all saints and teachers, with a specific originality because each one follows his own way, his own path of the Spirit, on the only way which is Christ.

Our specific duty will be to grasp this spiritual itinerary, in such a manner as to offer a transversal reading of Maximilian's figure and spirituality, like a specific vision, from a new angle that off Spiritual Theology. A specific and complementary vision within so many other converging visions that this International Congress offers us.

I wish to offer a modest contribution to the already conspicuous bibliography on the Saint, weave a gold thread that harmonically unites the dynamism of his existence, that thread of the Spirit in his person and in his works, characteristic of the many itineraries of holiness and spirituality, made beautiful and unpublished in Fr. Kolbe.

Therefore, we will try to delve into his spiritual progress to grasp the dynamic line of the Spirit in some of his stages and the contents therein.

The spiritual itinerary, being a true paradigm of spirituality, gives us the occasion to revisit his figure and to grasp certain new aspects of the Saint's life and message, even if with the limitations of one who is certainly not an expert and that is here, because of the benevolence of the organizers, to learn more than to teach.

I would like to accomplish this not with an abstract and deductive application, rather with deeper studies on the path that the Spirit opened up in the Saint's life especially through the testimonial of his Letters.

However, from the point of view of my specific approach of contemporary spirituality, it is only correct to locate Maximilian in the history of XX Century spirituality, to grasp his placement by the Spirit in a characteristic moment of the Church's spirit, moved by the Holy Spirit in his living his times, enriched by Him with His charismatic gifts, among which, we must remember to list the saints.

### **1. Saint Maximilian in contemporary spirituality**

I would like to begin with a specific approach to my specialization, asking myself Maximilian's location within contemporary spirituality

To tell the truth, we should assert that the presence of Maximilian within contemporary spirituality, as documented by the History of Spirituality and by Dictionaries, is rather modest.

Practically, his figure is documented in only one of the larger Dictionaries of contemporary spirituality, the French one, *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, with a brief article by Fr. E. Piacentini.

Very little is mentioned about the Saint in works of a general character elaborated during the last years of the XX Century on the history of contemporary spirituality. Yet, the *Bibliographia Internationalis Spiritualitatis* (BIS) points out, for a few years now, his person and documents his actuality among the important authors of spirituality for the XX Century, with a growing presence and an abundant production.

Why isn't Maximilian Kolbe registered, as is his due in the field of contemporary spirituality in any of the Dictionaries, Manuals, Histories on Spirituality? Several reasons could be behind this phenomenon.

On one hand, one finds a systematic ignorance about the contribution that has been emerging today, on the part of the authors of Eastern Europe within XX Century spirituality. Up until today, the emergence of documentation in the French-Spanish – Italian and Central European (especially German and Austrian) has prevailed.

On the other hand, the knowledge that Maximilian's emergence within the life of the Church has reference points such as the beatification by Paul VI on October 17th 1971 and his canonization by John Paul II on October 10th 1982 as a martyr of charity. His person is almost more contemporary to us during the last decades of the XX Century than during the first ones, when he lived and exercised his mission. Perhaps these earlier facts are not yet decisive for a reevaluation of the Saint's figure in the history of XX Century spirituality with its own light.

The last reason, perhaps, is the absorption his figure has undergone with regards to the other disciplines of the Church, in a special way Mariology and Marian spirituality.

Yet, St. Maximilian has many titles for being present in fact and by right in the history not only of the Church, but specifically in the history of XX Century spirituality,

with its own characteristic testimonial and certain specific contributions.

May I be allowed to enumerate them in the light of the triplicate methodological approach, which can trace the history of spirituality in a determined place in history and grasp the efficacy of the presence in this history of persons and of doctrines. An approach that allows pinpointing the feeling of a living presence of a person within the spirituality of the Church at a given moment: as testimonial and teacher, as an influential presence in the currents of thinking and of life, as a promoter of a movement of spirituality and of the apostolate.

For these three reasons, Maximilian has every right to come into the history of XX Century spirituality.

### **As teacher and as witness**

Like many other figures of our century, Maximilian Maria Kolbe is a witness and a teacher of holiness. He is both of these with certain notable characteristics. First of all, what makes him known in the Church as the martyr of Auschwitz, that is to say, a witness at the peak of one of the greatest XX Century dramas: Nazi persecution. In this drama, Maximilian is at the forefront because of his experience that joins him to many witnesses of faith in the XX Century, and makes him a model and a representative of many anonymous victims of Nazism, with his precious and unique testimony, that of his voluntary sacrifice of his life, substituting another person – the father of a family – destined to being the chosen victim. Because of this, and with good reason, Maximilian is a martyr and a witness of charity, a bright presence of grace in the darkness of the horror of concentration camps or lagers of the difficult and tragic XX Century.

Witness and model, Maximilian now emerges in the history of the XX Century Church, with his own light, as the patron of our difficult century, even if his light begins to radiate with forcefulness in the Church only after the official recognition of his holiness.

### **In the living currents of XX Century spirituality**

Maximilian is not a tame individual according to our schemes. On one hand his spirituality is typically post-Tridentine; at times it even seems too devotional, to traditional in comparison to what we would call the currents of renewal of spirituality in the XX Century that open the path to a new era. But on the other hand, his piety is original because of the typically Marian framework, daunting in its apostolic projection, typically expressive of true spiritual and apostolic renewal in an era that is new and in which Kolbe leaves a mark of apostolic novelty.

In fact, Maximilian finds himself immersed in the current of thought of the XX Century and also becomes a battling figure in what he believes to be a world mentality going against the Church and against its principles, yet opens new ways towards evangelization.

If, schematically, he is not among the pioneers of spiritual renewal in the return to the sources, with regards to Biblical, liturgical, patristic, monastic renewal, however his spirituality, anchored to the post-Tridentine tradition, opens with the Church to the world's currents, to a renewed evangelization, using modern means. Even in Maximilian we feel, as R. Guardini said in 1921, the Church "is awakening in souls". In fact, he is conscious of the potentiality of ecumenism, of the fruitfulness of inter-religious dialogue, in some ways he is a pioneer in this; he is a prophet of the presence of a mature laity in the world, of the

sense of Christian action in life and in history, promoting a true spirituality in the laity, which in various ways develops with his Marian charisma before and after the Council.

Therefore, Maximilian participates with his doctrine and his work in the great renewal enacted in XX Century spirituality, with a few characteristic contributions: some of a theological typology, such as a renewed Trinitarian and anthropological vision of Christian life, the incisiveness and originality of his communion with the Immaculate, a characteristic and original point in a new proposal of Marian spirituality in our century. We are dealing here with a Marian spirituality that goes from devotion to the presence in us of Mary, to a mystical vision of ecclesial Marianism. But above all, of a renewed devotion that is communion, identification and which bears within an extraordinary apostolic dynamism, to becoming the soul of his apostolate, the source of missionary fruitfulness in the "Militia of the Immaculate".

Therefore, we should not hesitate in shedding light even the novelty of the look on Mary in the light of the Trinity, the newness of the approach to Mary within devotion and Marian spirituality as communion of life and intents with the Immaculate.

We may also add as a specific contribution for the XX Century spirituality, the preciousness of witness in Maximilian Kolbe of the *apostolic mystic*. His generosity and his enthusiasm, the concrete and generous use of means of communication, the great universal openness in his apostolic action, make one think about that failed and misunderstood movement stamped as "Americanism" at the end of the XIX Century; an apostolic movement, which was none other than the rediscovery of a joyous, militant, enthusiastic Christianity capable of taking into consideration all the possibilities that the cultural resources of the modern era could offer to make the Gospel's message alive and universal. Even in this, Maximilian is a pioneer. In fact, in the person and work of Maximilian there is an effective apostolic creativity, which is a prelude of the many instances that emerged in Vatican II and in John Paul II's proposals for the new evangelization.

### **Founder of an ecclesial movement**

There is another reason why St. Maximilian should be given more space within XX Century spirituality. With his life and spirituality, he also represents a historical charisma for our times; he also possesses all the power of a collective grace or ecclesial charisma. First of all, this is expressed in the fact that he also is a Founder of an ecclesial movement: the Militia of the Immaculate. In fact, if the XX Century is the privileged season in the Church of the birth of a new phenomenon, the one of ecclesial movements and new communities, we may think about Maximilian as one of the pioneers in this field. Rather, chronologically speaking, he should be one of the first founders of an ecclesial movement in the XX Century, already in the second decade of the 1900's, still before the foundation of the "Legio Mariae" and other similar experiences that would emerge in the following decades, before and after Vatican II.

This detail seems important to me, not only because of the prophetic intuition of Maximilian and because of his concrete execution in a movement that becomes international, but also because of his missionary presence in Poland and in Japan, and for the concrete lay dimension he expresses, with the modernity of a structure that would also be a reference point for other Church experiences: the concept and the realization of a "city", a true laboratory of incarnate spirituality: the city of the Immaculate.

Finally, and we must not forget this, Maximilian's spiritual fruitfulness is also

measured by the fact of being teacher, father, inspirer of new Kolbian communities and institutes, in the XX Century Church.

For all these reasons, it seems important to me to place also in the spiritual itinerary of the XX Century Church and among the great witnesses of contemporary spirituality.

## **2. Spiritual itinerary in the light of Spiritual Theology**

Before speaking about the spiritual itinerary of Maximilian, I would just like to give a short idea about the great theme of spirituality.

*(oral summary  
by the Author)*

## **3. Ideal stages in Maximilian Kolbe's spiritual itinerary**

In the light of the brief notions just mentioned, we may ask ourselves which was Maximilian's spiritual itinerary, the theme of our specific approach, its progressive achievement, from the baptismal waters to the baptism of blood as a martyr.

I do not intend here to make a compromising approach between the spiritual itinerary in general and that of Saint Maximilian specifically; however, certain reference points will be useful to us to evaluate the more important moments, the decisive passages in his path in the Spirit, locating his texts at the specific moment of his life.

We will be allowed some stimulating comparison between Maximilian's path and some reference points from the Saints of the Carmel, Saint Theresa of Jesus and John of the Cross, Theresa of the Child Jesus that Maximilian quotes and loves in a unique way.

Maximilian Kolbe's spiritual itinerary is not different from his normal and concrete life, from his coming to life and grace to the giving his life as apostle and missionary, and consuming it with Christ in the lager in Auschwitz, as a martyr of charity at the apex of a progressive development of his life in Christ and according to the Spirit.

A first approach may be made on this spiritual itinerary starting with the fundamental stages of his spiritual biography, underlining what seems to be the decisive moments of a constant and harmonious growth, almost eternal predestination and divine election, for and in the Church of his and our times.

But a detailed, almost biographical description of Maximilian Kolbe's itinerary is not our job at this time. This would entail, rather, a rereading of his external biography with the concern to delve into his internal biography, especially through the knowledge of his path, incited and guided by the Spirit. A suggestive and unpublished approach to be realized especially with the help of his writings, but which I do not feel able to make.

I will however attempt a first and simple reading of certain testimonials drawn from his letters, emphasizing certain aspects and moments of the spiritual path the Holy Spirit opens in the historical event of Maximilian.

### **Novelties in a providential predestination**

A first suggestive moment in the spiritual path of Kolbe brings us to grasp a first revealing dynamism of grace in his prophetic predestination to martyrdom. The itinerary of his infancy and childhood in a propitious environment of Christian life at the end of the XIX Century and at the beginning of the XX Century is marked by a specific illuminating grace, that of the vision of Mary offering him two crowns, a white and a red one, sign of virginity and of martyrdom.

This is a supernatural experience, gratuitous and unforeseen, then capable of marking his entire existence and realized in the future as a prophecy. That Maximilian's life is under the influence of grace from the beginning is evident in principle; its clear manifestation from the first years of life, with a grace of this kind, is a given that belongs to a predilection for God manifested through the mediation of Mary.

It is a sort of mystic grace that opens a future pathway, a type of star that guides our Saint in the heavens of his existence and follows him unto death. In the love that this premonition manifests, Maximilian experiences a predilection for Mary.

Later, as a sign of his specific vocation to the apostolate in the Order of Friars Minor Conventual, we find the event characteristic of participation in a mission with the friars of the Order, before even entering the novitiate. It also seems important that this moment, which orients his path concretely in the Church, at the beginning of the apostolate when he lives in a popular mission together with the friars of his future religious family, a premonition of his apostolic and Franciscan vocation.

An intuition that soon became an ecclesial and apostolic project, for his entire life, with the inspiration for the foundation of the Militia of the Immaculate.

During his studies in Rome, in fact, the inspiration to found the Militia of the Immaculate, shortly before being ordained deacon then priest, is together a grace by the Immaculate that forestalls but also a generous answer that he realizes. At the age of 24, he makes an important apostolic choice, communicated to others and shared by others: the foundation of the Militia of the Immaculate. Something big and not just the fruit of a passing fervor. A true charismatic grace of Marian apostolate.

These three episodes are the premises of a vocation to holiness and to the apostolate, always however with a mysterious prophesy of martyrdom that weighs on Maximilian's heart and certainly orients his life, and with a lively presence of Mary the Immaculate who certainly fills and moves his entire existence.

### **In the melting pot of purifications**

These moments characteristic to Kolbe's life mark a path of progressive maturity regarding his interiority and his prayer, in assimilation to Christ under the protection of Mary. We would like to know more especially through his autobiographical writings, but he does not satisfy our curiosity. He is reticent in telling himself, even his spiritual experience. But, every once in a while, something comes out in his correspondence and this is what we would like to refer to.

In the middle of these moments of great fervor and of true illuminating experience of grace, *the trial* occurs in Maximilian's life.

The double hospital stay at Zakopane for consumption in the years that follow his ordination are difficult moments of trial, especially if one considers that we are dealing with the first years of his priesthood, years open to a promising apostolic life that is

brusquely interrupted by illness and perhaps, at some times, threatened by the fear of a premature death.

Here perhaps we find ourselves facing a true dark night of senses, according to the terminology and the perspective of Saint John of the Cross; a fundamental stage in a life of perfection, incited by God to bring out the solid Christian virtues and mature apostolic projects; virtues and projects that emerge increasingly through God's will, which purifies ideals, attitudes, motivations and leads Maximilian, in this case, towards the fullness of an truly charismatic apostolate.

Mention of this spiritual stage can be found in his letters, like when during this period he feels like an exile living out of the convent, or when he feels the nearness of death. Between these lines on his impressions we can read the grace of a physical and spiritual trial, of an illness that soon seems to break in on the most beautiful dreams and proposals, and brings a purification of his great ideals and values in his life, which he has cared about since the beginning of his religious life: living in the convent and in his own community.

The danger that his life should end early and bury him right there, as he says himself, means entirely placing himself in the hands of God to Maximilian.

Two moments of divine purification that go on for months, which I believe to be important. God purifies him from the attachment to living in the religious house; subjects him to a trial where he must begin to understand the importance of giving himself up to the Will of God and the supreme value of obedience. They are the prelude to what his death would be. He dies in exile, out of the convent, like Jesus outside the city; dies subject to a divine will that he accepts with joy, even if interpreted by his executioners.

That this period is strongly inspiring and fruitful to his spirituality is demonstrated by certain beautiful considerations of a spiritual type that deeply mark certain aspects of his spirituality.

One of these says: "Perfection consists in the love of God, in union with Him, in our divinization". The answer lies in achieving God's will, which in Maximilian also means the supreme value of obedience. A fundamental lesson for the dynamism of self-despoiling that accompanies him to death. "Placing oneself under God's Will and its achievement, especially in what is contrary to our senses and even to a limited and fallible intellect, enflames evermore the love towards God. The Cross is the school of love".

Therefore it is not strange that in this context certain characteristic fruits of total abandonment to the Immaculate's action emerge, as an expression of entry in a true "mystical" life, that is to say, a life guided by God, even if in this case through the person of the Immaculate who directs his life and which he holds on to with all his heart. Thus one can see one of the main points of Kolbian spirituality, a special consecration to the Immaculate that She may work in us, as an expression of Merciful God. In fact during this period, Maximilian writes: "Let us be guided, let us be quiet, quiet, we should not pretend to do more than what She wishes, or faster; we must allow ourselves to be lead by Her".

But at times his confidences are treacherous. It seems important to me, like a glimpse upon his life, during the second stay in Zakopane when he is once again in the hospital for pulmonary illness, this confidence expressed in a letter dated January 3<sup>rd</sup> 1927 to the youths that have the religious enrobing: "To be prepared for moments of darkness, of anguish, of doubt, of fear, of temptation at times evermore insistent, of suffering in the body as in the soul – which are one hundred times harder... However we must fear nothing because we can and must win. But how? By not trusting in ourselves and offering

all of ourselves, all our temptations and difficulties to the Immaculate, we will surely be victorious always (evidently, we must do everything possible on our part to not fall) the Immaculate cannot abandon Her children”.

I do not think this is a mere sermon, but a communication of experience, of a statement of his way of being and living, of a mystic in entrusting to God and allowing to be lead by Him, through the Immaculate, as the fruit of the trial of illness, which reveals itself fruitful, and as a certainty of victory.

This simple delving into a moment characteristic to Maximilian’s life should urge us to follow his epistolary in searching for traces of a spiritual autobiography. However, it is not our job, and Maximilian is very reticent with his spiritual confidences on his state of being, as if he forgets himself and thinks only about the many things he must do for God.

It should suffice to mention this crucial moment which leads to, as we know, a period of intense apostolic life, fruit of a strong adhesion to God’s Will, in docile communion in the Immaculate’s presence and action, that is a period of true union with God, with this Marian connotation.

This way, it seems clear how the blossoming of Maximilian’s works is the fruit of an intense interior life that leads him to live not his will but God’s Will, in a state that willingly may be compared, at this time, to what Theresa of Avila proposes as an ideal of perfection in the fifth part of the *Interior Castle*.

### **Apostolic maturity, spiritual paternity, pedagogy of holiness**

The following years see a great blossoming of works: approval of the Militia, ever growing in number of copies and international diffusion of the review the “Knight of the Immaculate”, the foundation of the City of the Immaculate, trips in Europe and in Asia, the foundation of the Militia and the Garden of the Immaculate in Japan, the desire to extend other cities of the Immaculate throughout the world, as he wishes in India where he receives a warm welcome from a Spanish Discalced Carmelite Bishop: Mons. Angel María Pérez Cecilia.

This is the blooming of love of God in a characteristic and dynamic welcome of His Will, like the playing of an arrangement that is in heaven. For Maximilian, these are times filled with apostolic maturity, true to a characteristic mystic of the apostolate, which unites love of God and love of neighbor.

Here, traces emerge of not only spiritual and apostolic maturity but also of a true charisma of spiritual paternity/maternity that develops into a true pedagogy of holiness that Maximilian communicates to his children/disciples, always looking at the Immaculate.

This too is a well-known characteristic of spiritual itinerary: the passage from purification to apostolic love, self-oblivion for others, the effective blossoming not only of works of true “leadership” and more concretely conscience and the practice of a spiritual paternity.

All things that presuppose a special grace from the Holy Spirit in Maximilian, a transformation of the individual into a new creature, a dilation of the ability to love and serve.

As to this internal maturity that leads Fr. Kolbe slowly to a true race towards living holiness and in perfection, understood, a beautiful letter written in 1933 is also an expression of great worth, written from Shanghai and addressed to his spiritual children in Mugenzai no Sono in Japan. It is a small synthesis of spirituality that reveals his state of mind, in a stage of authentic and fruitful spiritual maturity, and already contains the



fundamental traces of his spiritual dynamism, made of holiness and of the apostolate in communion with the Immaculate.

Here are some autobiographical concepts that allow us to grasp the path Maximilian was undertaking not only externally on this trip to China and India, but also on his spiritual path of growing faithfulness.

First of all, the Saint expresses a strong acknowledgement of his paternity/maternity, spiritual and charismatic, which he cannot ignore, as charisma of the Spirit, and which he tries to communicate to his own, from the words of Paul (cf. 1 Cor 4:15): "I became your father through the Gospel". In fact, he audaciously writes: "I too, apply myself with the same joy, happy in the fact that the Immaculate deemed worthy, despite my weakness, stupidity and unworthiness, to imbue you through me with Her life, making me your mother".

But what life is he talking about? Here, we find one of the highest definitions of spiritual life the Saint proposes, and which goes back to the source of divine life or divinization, as he would underline in other texts: «This is how Divine life, the life of the Most Holy Trinity, flows from the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus through the Immaculate Heart of Mary into our poor hearts, but often through other created hearts. Not all fully understand that this life is love. This is why Jesus said: "I have come to bring fire on the earth..."».

This is Trinitarian life that through the Christological-Marian mediation reaches the hearts of the faithful, even in the specific human mediations, which are transparencies of the presence and action of God. Divine life which is love in abundance, love of work and of suffering, always lived in a personal communion with the Immaculate.

In the same letter we also can find one of the most beautiful and felt pages on the essence and the apex of love, with an exquisite mystic tonality. In fact he writes about sacrifice and sacrifices: «Let us remember that love lives, is nourished by sacrifices. Let us thank the Immaculate for internal peace, for the ecstasy of love, however we must not forget that all of this, while good and beautiful, is not in fact the essence of love, rather perfect love can exist even without all of this. The apex of love is the state Jesus found himself in on the Cross when he said: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" ( Mt 27:46; Mk 15:34)».

This theological-spiritual impulse, the fruit of a mystical intuition and a vital participation, is notable; this is the spiritual experience which allows our Saint to cross the threshold of comprehension of the greatest pain and the greatest love in the crucifix abandoned by the Father. It is a knowledgeable intuition of the Spirit that strikes Maximilian and makes him a spiritual contemporary person to John of the Cross who makes a similar assertion, and anticipates, during 1933 the Holy Year of Redemption, with the gaze on the Cross, an intuition that would be the key to theology and spirituality in the XX Century.

Ever in line with what was expressed in other texts is one of the affirmations which have become the keys to a strong understanding of spirituality: love is sacrifice, intellectual sacrifice is obedience; but communion with this total obedience with the Immaculate's feelings, the Marian way of perfection of love, to complete detachment of self: "Above all else, sacrifice of the intellect and of the will of Holy Obedience. When Love for Her, for God's goodness in Her, for love for the Divine Heart personified in Her, when this love will have grasped and penetrated us, then the sacrifices will become a need for the soul. The soul will wish for constant demonstrations always new, always deeper in love, and these demonstrations are none other than sacrifices..."

This language should not mislead us as if it were but an ascetic exhortation. It is an expression of elevated mysticism, of a comprehension of the highest spiritual apex, like the one described by Theresa of Avila in the seventh chapter of the *Interior Castle*: the desire to live and serve with words and great works, for the love of the Cross, in the characteristic question and answer. The question is the following: Do you know what being spiritual truly is? The answer may be summarized as follows: not having to try to serve God only through words but with works, becoming slaves of God, marked by the seal of the Cross to be a gift for all, like Christ on the Cross.

This is what Maximilian begins to understand and live until the end of his existence.

This spiritual and apostolic maturity and this concrete and felt spiritual paternity are manifested in his letters, even with a specific dimension of pedagogy to holiness and to spirituality, to use a term highlighted today by John Paul II in NMI no. 31.

Certain letters that manifest his ardor to impassion his disciples and children to holiness are particularly important, but always according to his specific line of thought, which is total donation, absolute obedience, communion with the Immaculate.

In a long letter written to a friend, he traces a synthesis of Marian spirituality emphasizing consonance and his own accents with respect to the treaty of true devotion by the then Blessed Louis Grignon de Montfort.

His holy obsession to completely live the Will of God comes out with these vigorous lines: "The Will of God is truly the essence of holiness, of love, of divinization".

Will of God to be intended not in the ascetic sense, but in the purely mystic sense, a will that takes hold of us, manifests itself in us, involves us and models us. The regal path to holiness has an essentially Marian connotation to it in Maximilian, inasmuch as doing God's Will is doing the Immaculate's Will, being in Her and She in us: "Annihilating oneself and becoming Her: the fundamental element of a similar transformation consists in conforming, in melting into, in uniting our will to Hers. Without a doubt, Her will is fully joined to God's Will; therefore, nothing but uniting our will to Hers is necessary, thus through Her we unite with God. But only holy Obedience is able to manifest to us the infallible way of God's Will, Her Will".

Kolbian language is at the same time ascetic and mystic, but it actually is more ascetical than mystical. The words he uses not only for his theology but also concerning his experiences are transformed, conform and unify; this is more an indication of a mystical union, like the conforming to God's Will in obedience, than only an ascetic effort.

Therefore we can assert that in these and other Kolbian pages on union with God, the divinization which is union with God through the mystical union with His Will, through identification with Mary, is already an expression of the mystical life in Maximilian, which has by then reached a very high level of union with God, always with his specific Marian characteristic.

### **A Marian mystical union in the pure act of love**

In fact, we must assert that the originality of Maximilian's spiritual itinerary is that the apex of holiness in him is configured, realized and expressed knowledgeably as a Marian mystical union.

In this sense we can speak about Maximilian as a *mystic of the Immaculate*, not

only from the poetic point of view, as a person with the grace of contemplation of the mystery of Immaculate Mary in relation to the Trinity and with the Holy Spirit in a particular way, but also as a person who has come into a true mystagogy or experience of mystic communion with the Immaculate.

This mystical union with the Immaculate, which marks the apex of Maximilian's life, is expressed in various letters with a theology that always leads Mary back to the Trinitarian mystery and the model. To think about the Trinity is thinking about Her, to think about Her is to think about the Trinity, without the possibility of separating them.

He makes an effort to explain these things even to those who see his insistence as an exaggeration that could overshadow Christ's role and mediation, when to him a separation between Christ and Mary is unthinkable, to him even the suspicion of a slightest deformation in this unbreakable communion is an outrage to the Immaculate to him.

To live with Her and like Her means to aspire to the most perfect union with God. A union expressed continuously as a *pure act of love*, a word dear to Kolbian language, as in John of the Cross, as the apex of spiritual life and apostolic fruitfulness.

This pure act of love, of the Crucifix in His abandonment on the Cross, as was said quoting Maximilian, is characteristic of the Immaculate, who certainly he tries to live and transmit as a secret of life; but it is also condition and fruit at the same time of the perfect union with God who regenerates souls: "Only one act of perfect love regenerates the soul; let us use this means often. It is not so difficult to do because the essence of such an act is love ready for any sacrifice; let us try to please Her by paying in person, without worrying about the reward or the punishment".

In Maximilian's life there is no lack of spiritual trials that could be assimilated into what John of the Cross calls the dark night of the Spirit; a theme that should be delved into, which he certainly lived and was subjected to in his martyrial death, close to the trials of Jesus in Gethsemane and Calvary.

Maximilian's intense prayer and life of prayer are within this context, as the regal path towards union with God. It should suffice to quote his long letter on prayer to accredit his orating and contemplative depth.

This is how we can understand his desire for a pure and purified love, which is natural in Mary just as the actuation of the Holy Spirit, and in Maximilian is the work of purifying grace.

### **In the fullness of apostolic life**

Therefore, to enter the path of pure love is just like reaching the apex and walking not on the mountain paths but on the crest of charity, practically on the path of union with God, lived from the beginning an always growing donation to the Immaculate, proposed by Her and donated to us as the Marian way to holiness and the apostolate.

He expresses this with conviction. And without a doubt, this is a characteristic way of live and direct experience rather than speculation, therefore of a mystical life; this is made obvious when he states that Mary, and proposes, as the summit of holiness and the apostolate, this conformation: "Every thought, word, action and suffering of the Immaculate were the perfect act of love to God, of love to Jesus. However, we must tell the souls, to all and to each one singularly, to those living now and will be till the end of the world, with examples, with the written, printed, lively word spread through the radio with the help of painting, of sculpture, etc... what and how the Immaculate would think,

say, do in the concrete circumstances of present life in the various social environments, so that a most perfect love, even the Immaculate's love towards the Divine Heart, may spread throughout the world".

The most striking thing in some of Maximilian's letters where the presence of Mary is very strong, is not only the total communion with the Trinity, but also the mystical experience of a sort of "apostolic totality", of a desire to embrace all humanity and all of creation in the Immaculate. This is a desire typical of persons who have reached the highest peaks of union with God: being the fullness of love that takes everyone and is made incarnate in an apostolic dimension, which tends to the transformation of persons and structures.

Here, we find ourselves at a peak of Kolbe's spiritual itinerary, being able to compare it to similar expressions as those of his beloved Theresa of Lisieux who chooses all, who wishes to be love in the heart of the Church to reach out to all with prayer and with love.

This complete mystical comprehension is manifested in many writings and gives the measure of the vastness of Maximilian's soul towards all human horizons like the living presence of the Immaculate in men's existence through an apostolate that embraces everything and everyone. Here is one of these texts in which the language of totality is not the fruit of rhetoric but of apostolic love flowing from the heart of the Holy Spirit and that wishes to embrace all. Letter 647, sent from the City of the Immaculate in Poland to the one in Japan, expresses ardently this language of totality and a strong moment of mystical inspiration and Marian apostolic maturity. We will quote some parts of Maximilian's strong words "we should..." which represents a sort of dream of love:

"We should not forget that not only Poland and Japan exist under the sun, but that an even greater number of hearts beat beyond the boundaries of these nations. When will the knights of the Immaculate reach them? When will they found the Niepokalanów in these lands? When will they lead them to the Most Holy Heart of Jesus along the white steps of the Immaculate that Saint Francis followed?" This is thinking on a large scale in terms of universality about the presence and the action of the Immaculate with a sort of typically Slav messianism, like the one that echoes often in the language of John Paul II.

"We should consolidate this Niepokalanów, so that works will never stop – in fact some people believe that for various institutions that distance themselves from their origins they weaken with regards to their initial impulse – but come closer every day to the Immaculate, deepening every day their belonging to Her and in such a way that She may freely work through them to the advantage of souls". This is the totality of a collective love that matures in a dynamism of growing faithfulness.

"We should also harmonize and perfect their activities in such a way as to truly achieve, with an organizational effort and as soon as possible, for every soul as lost as possible in who knows what remote island or mountain or inaccessible forest and accompany it on the way to the Immaculate". Again, this is the totality and the penetration of the whole world, with the urgency of today.

"We should also think about delving into knowledge on the Immaculate". And mystic Kolbe flies high and descends from on high, first to hypothesize the best studies for the comprehension of the mystery of the Immaculate in Her relations with the Trinity, to make them known to all and again – here is the great mystical dreamer – to study, to gather, to divulge something he calls "Acta Immaculatae in universo mundo", the immense graces given to men by the Immaculate in the entire world, in all of history. Magnificent ecstasy of apostolic love!

And again, this time with the language of a mathematician, the desire to act, to act together, to consume oneself with zeal for the Immaculate: "But each and every one may surpass me even a thousand times! And I a million times. And they me, billions of times... in a noble competition; in reality, this does not mean that I or he or another may do more for the Immaculate's cause, but that the maximum may be done and as quickly as possible. She takes possession in the perfect way of every soul, living in them, acting, loving the Divine Heart, the Divine Love, God Himself. In a word, potentiating in an unlimited and evermore intense way the creature's love for the Creator".

This vision of the Marian apostolate through the City of the Immaculate breathes in a fullness that cannot be expressed if not with great apostolic maturity, the fruit of action in him of the Holy Spirit's grace.

### **Martyrial mystic, mystic of service**

In the seventh chapter of the *Interior Castle*, Theresa after having narrated her experiences at the peak of Christian life – communion with the Trinity, spiritual marriage, ecclesialization of life in the service of the Lord – mentions two peaks of Christian vocation as the apex of holiness: the mystique of the martyr and the mystique of service. The mystique of service translates into an effective desire to do great works for the Lord. A mystique that we amply find ardently lived by Maximilian who is also a leader of souls, as Theresa depicts certain saints among which Dominic and Francis. The mystique of martyrdom is the grace of giving one's life for the Lord, like Peter and Paul did at the peak of their love for Christ and their assimilation to the Cross for love, model for all holiness.

Mystique of service which presupposes a grace from the Spirit that leads to oblivion of oneself and total giving of life for the Church. The mystique of martyrdom that also includes the grace of the election of one's life with an effective effusion of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the martyr.

In this case we could say that all is realized in Maximilian, but with an exquisite Marian note of communion with the Immaculate. His last words while leaving the City of the Immaculate, a few months before his martyrdom: "Let us be led always more perfectly by the Immaculate, in any place and in any way She wishes to place us, so that by doing our duties we may contribute to all souls being conquered by Her love".

And it is peace that transpires from his last message to his mother, the custodian of his secret, of his predestination as martyr when in Auschwitz he writes: "Here, all is well. Beloved Mamma, do not worry about me or my health because the good Lord is in every place and with great love thinks about everything and everyone".

Magnificent confession of faith and love, but also a stupendous grace of mystic peace and serene rest in God's Will.

Maximilian, as we know, died at the peak of this Christian spiritual path, at the acme of a martyrdom which at the same time, in his case, is witness of faith in Christ and love for brothers. Therefore, it also sees the two moments which according to the Saint from Avila mark the peak of Christian life, united within it.

His spiritual path reaches its true apex, that of assimilation to Christ on the Cross in the maximum expression of love for Him and for his brothers.

This is at the same time the apex of the mystique of the apostolic service and ecclesial martyrdom.

## Conclusion

A key to reading the Christian path in the Spirit can be seen in Paul who in Eph 3:14-21 speaks about the four dimensions of growth in Christ's love. Holiness is a growing of the heart, of the mind, of life in all directions. The ineffable made Paul express the measure, without measure, of this Christian spiritual itinerary.

- *To grow in length...* Life is a path, experience, a story that slows down or accelerates; a story with many events, from birth and even before birth, with trials, sins, difficulties, a "via cruce" and a "via lucis", a progressive path towards perfection.

- *To grow in width...* The word width recalls the extension of life. A life that extends, widens, becomes more complex and rich, in the measure it relates with other persons, other places. Christian life is beautiful, in the measure in which it is populated by personal relationships that open the heart and make it capable of loving, of serving, of knowing, of extending communion of relations according to the same measure of God.

- *To grow in height...* God is greater than our heart. Yet, He invites us with our small hearts, in our own small way and brief and limited experience, to enter the riches which are His, but also ours. He gives us all. Everything is a gift. Everything is a grace. He communicates His mysteries; he makes us become "cosmonauts of the Spirit", like what happens to the mystics to whom He reveals the mysteries from above. Each Christian is called upon to grow in knowledge and in experience about the things of God.

- *To grow in depth...* One gains knowledge of being able to enter this marvelous vision of all, from our being inhabited by Christ. It is the surprise of our interior reality. We are an interior castle, the paradise of God, the living place of the Trinity. But also the unification of our being. Reconciliation with our body, with our senses, with our feelings, with our psyches; and the healing of our wounds. Everything is bathed in the mercy of God.

Maximilian Kolbe's spiritual itinerary can be seen in these four dimensions of the life of Christ and in the growth of love towards Christ.

The length of the spiritual itinerary which starts at baptism and goes to martyrdom, through 47 and a half years of human, political, religious and social events, in an itinerary of assimilation to Christ, in communion with the Immaculate, to the supreme configuration with the Crucified and Glorified Lord.

The immense breadth of openness of the heart and mind, his trips, the multiple relations lived and programmed that have dilated his heart with the same horizons as the Church and the world, to embracing everything and everyone in the Immaculate.

The height of mystic vision of God's things, as mystic of the Trinity and of the Immaculate in the Trinity, true Wiseman, intuitive, contemplative and mystic of deification like the living word of grace and union with God; divinization that transforms the creature and makes the total self-giving dynamic, like the Immaculate and those wishing to live the Immaculate's mystery and mission.

Depth of a strong experience, which with purification and illumination, special graces of apostolic love and martyrdom, internally and effectively model Maximilian and make him similar to Christ, through the mediation of the Immaculate Virgin.

These are just some of the characteristics of Maximilian Maria Kolbe's spiritual itinerary, drawn in the light of his experiences and from some "autobiographical" pages of his Epistolary.