

# THE MYSTICAL LANGUAGE OF SAINT MAXIMILIAN MARIA KOLBE

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(Summary)

## INTRODUCTION

Saint Maximilian Maria Kolbe is a great *mystical theologian*, an eminent representative of the "theology lived by saints" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n° 27), where love and charity make faith shine forth. In fact, if faith, hope and charity are the "virtutes theologicae", the greatest and therefore the most "theological" of the three being charity (cf. I Cor 13:13). True knowledge on God, that is to say theology, mainly depends on charity since "everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love" (I Jn 4:7-8).

In Kolbe one can see clearly the dual dynamism of the *theology of saints*: the dynamism of the "faith searching for intelligence" (*fides et ratio*) and the dynamism of love that more deeply penetrates the Mystery of Faith (*fides et amor*). The first dynamism, which characterizes academic theology, and the second, which characterizes mystical theology are evident in our saint, a Doctor of Theology and Martyr of Charity.

His "living theology" mainly makes truth concerning *Mary in the Mystery of Christ and the Church* (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, VIII) shine, as an essential truth in faith and in the life of the Church, in tight relationship with the *universal vocation to holiness* (LG V).

In this perspective of the *theology of saints*, we propose a *reading itinerary* of some of Kolbe's *Writings*, in the light of the mystical saints closest to him: Saint Catherine Labouré and Saint Bernadette Soubirous, Saint Louis Marie Grignion de Montfort, Saint Francis of Assisi, Saint Theresa of Lisieux and Saint Gemma Galgani.

## I/ MYSTICAL LANGUAGE AS THE LANGUAGE OF LOVE

The *agapè*, or charity love, is the greatest gift from the Holy Spirit, as the only love from God and Man in Jesus Christ, divine and human love that fill the entire heart.

### *A/ Prayer as the privileged expression of love*

In Kolbe just like in other mystics, prayer is the privileged expression of faith, hope and above all love. Thus, in our saint's writings, we often find texts in prayer form (cf. for example 1159, 1307, 1305) where his doctrine is manifested in the liveliest and most dynamic way. Speaking about Mary, Kolbe expresses his certainty that She tenderly loves all men, and his desire to make Her known and loved by all through the M. I. In him, just like in Saint Francis and Saint Louis Marie, prayer does not stop ever at the figure of Mary, but through Her and in Her turns to Christ and to the Trinity. In the same way, prayer must support theological studies. (1308).

### *B/ Unlimited love*

In all mystics, the language of love is a strong language, "excessive", and that might seem "exaggerated" to theologians who are not saints, especially when dealing with Mary. Actually, the "pious exaggerations", those often present in the spirituals who are not saints, are absent in saints. Saints never exaggerate. This Louis Marie and Theresa de Lisieux state that they do not exaggerate when they say the strongest things. Like them, Kolbe manifests the authentic meaning of the expression: "*nunquam satis de Maria*". What Theresa wrote to her scrupulous cousin is fully verified in him: "do not be afraid of *loving too much* the Holy Virgin, you will *never* love Her *enough*, and Jesus will be happy because the Holy Virgin is His Mother". In fact, according to Montfort, the "scrupulous devotees" will be those who fear "loving Mary too much" for fear of loving Jesus less.

On this point there is clearly a deep influence from Saint Gemma Galgani, perhaps the most "excessive" mystic in the expression of her love for Christ on the Cross. Thus, in the notes of his last spiritual exercises dated November 1940, Kolbe copies what he wrote twenty years earlier: "To love without limitations" (Gemma Galgani) (986). From him we know that the words "without limitations" were cancelled by the Episcopal censor of Krakow (37). In the same way, the theologian entrusted with examining Theresa's Offering to Merciful Love censured the expression of her "infinite desires".

Regarding this "Unlimited Love for the Immaculate", one of the most characteristic texts is a letter written from Japan in 1932 for the brothers at Niepokalanów (461). It is an impassioned exhortation that contains this essential assertion: "in a word, the '*unlimitedness*' of love: this is our characteristic". This unlimited love is expressed as complete belonging to Mary to share Her closeness to God. This is the entire spirit of the M. I.

### *C/ Unlimited Consecration*

The fundamental expression of this unlimited love is unlimited consecration. In fact, according to the words of Theresa de Lisieux: "*To love is to give everything and giving oneself*". The essence of love is not the sentiment but the human will that the Holy Spirit makes capable of complete self-giving. With different and complementary expressions, Montfort, Theresa and Kolbe place the same complete gift as the necessary foundation for an authentic Christian life oriented towards holiness. This is the same total self-giving to Jesus in the Trinity through Mary's Heart and hands that Theresa calls the "holocaust of Love" and Montfort calls "slavery of Love", in the most intimate communion with the sole Sacrifice of the Redeemer, of who for love for us took on the "condition of slave" unto death on the Cross. It is the full expression of baptismal consecration and priesthood.

As to this point, one of Kolbe's more illuminating texts is his letter (written in Italian) in 1933 to Father Antonio Vivoda (508). According to the words, "the essence of the M. I. Lies in that consecration must be, in itself, *unlimited*". On the common basis of this unlimited consecration, Maximilian compares his doctrine with that of Montfort. The differences are verbal, but "not real", to such a point that he concludes: "Therefore, the devotion taught by the Blessed Grignon is all ours". In fact, in the M. I. we can find the *Totus tuus* from Montfort, because "the essence is belonging to Her unlimitedly". In the same letter, we can see all of his mystical and practical dynamism of this kind of consecration, his missionary orientation, and also his fruitfulness in theological work.

Maximilian thinks about the foundation of a “Marian Academy... with a doctorate in Mariology”, but always in relationship with “everyday life, for the conversion and sanctification of souls”.

## II/ THE MYSTICAL LANGUAGE AS A THEOLOGICAL LANGUAGE

In Kolbe’s Writings, we can see how this language of love that characterizes mystical theology is also the most theological language. Greater than faith and hope, charity is also more “theological”. Thus, our saint’s theology appears as a more synthetic, more dynamic, more dogmatic theology.

### *A/ The most synthetic theology*

With Mary, who “treasured... and pondered them in Her heart” (cf. Lk 2:19), Kolbe embraces all the Mysteries of God and man in Jesus Christ in charity, in a synthesis of life and of faith, of contemplation and of action. Like all mystics, our saint has a strong sense of unity of the Mystery. Certain texts are illuminating regarding this point (634, 603, 643). While an exterior and superficial theology sees the Mysteries of the faith as one “next” to the other, or one “after” the other, this interior and deep theology always sees them one “in” another or “through” another. Thus unlimited consecration to the Immaculate is a unitarian dynamism of charity that leads the “knight” to loving Mary and making Her loved, to fully belong to Jesus through Her and in Her. This does not mean loving Mary “next” or “after” Him, but to love Him perfectly through and in Her. Just like Montfort, Maximilian manifests the splendor of Jesus’ love for and in Mary, facing the objections of “critical” and “scrupulous” worshippers. Thus, in charity, Mary becomes the best “place” for theological summarization.

### *B/ The most dogmatic theology*

Animated by a charity that “believes all” (cf. I Cor 13:7), mystical theology is also the most “dogmatic” theology, the one that makes the language of faith shine the most in its essential expression: dogma, also showing the existential value. Thus the Church experimented from the beginning how the love of Mary is full of the greatest dogmatic truths about the Person of the Word made Flesh (cf. the title of *Theotokos* at the Council of Ephesus). Kolbe’s Mariology, like that of Montfort, has an essentially dogmatic nature.

In Maximilian’s Writings, we can find a splendid synthesis of mystical and dogmatic language in a 1938 article (written in Latin) titled “*The Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary in relationship to mediation of all the graces*” (1229). In the light of the dogma on Divine Motherhood and the Immaculate Conception, our saint penetrates in the mystery of Mary’s cooperation in the Economy of Salvation in Christ Jesus. What is striking is the harmony between the Christological and the pneumatological aspects. Like Irenaeus and Montfort, Maximilian contemplates Mary in the “Father’s two hands, the Son and the Holy Spirit, as the Mother of the Son and the Bride of the Holy Spirit. Within this context, the words “Co-redemptrix” and “Mediatrix” are explained as to their true meaning: Mary is Co-redemptrix as She is the Mother of the Redeeming Son, and as Mediatrix of all graces as the Bride of the Holy Spirit. In the same article, Maximilian quotes Montfort many times, and only at the end does he speak about the most

recent charismatic facts: the revelation of Mary to Saint Catherine Labouré (the Miraculous Medal) and to Saint Bernadette (Lourdes).

*C/ The most dynamic theology*

Kolbe's theology, like Montfort, is characterized by the same Trinitarian and dynamic Christocentrism: Mary is contemplated in the heart of the great movement of coming and going (*exitus et reditus*, action and reaction), according to which everything comes from the Father for Christ in the Spirit and returns to the Father for Christ in the Spirit. Thus Maximilian contemplates "the life of the Trinity in man" (1310) as the great dynamism of love that comes from God and that returns to God. According to his words: "the apex of love for Creation that returns to God is the Immaculate, the being without the blemish of sin, all beautiful, totally belonging to God".

The same dynamism enlivens all of the history of salvation. Like Montfort, Maximilian has a strong sense of the historical-eschatological dimension of the Mystery of the Church.

As a Franciscan, he knows how his Order gave the greatest contribution to the Church in manifesting the truth of the Immaculate Conception of Mary. The seven centuries necessary to achieve the dogmatic definition are like a "front page". The "Second page" is thus defined: "to sow this truth in the hearts of all those that live and will live until the end of times, and to care for the growth and the fruits of holiness. To introduce the Immaculate into the hearts of men that She may raise them to the throne of Her Son, lead them to the knowledge of Him and enflame them with love towards the Most Holy Heart" (486).

In his first encounter with the *Treaty* by Montfort, Maximilian was struck by his eschatological orientation (1129). The great saints of the future will be characterized by this "singular devotion towards the Most Holy Virgin" in being at the forefront of the battle against the forces of evil. We may conclude this "itinerary" by considering how Kolbe perfectly incarnates this new type of holiness. His "spiritual testament" on the Immaculate Conception (1318) is signed by his martyrdom: unlimited love for the Immaculate that leads him to unlimited love for others.