

ST. MAXIMILIAN THE ORGANIZER: A CHARISM AT THE SERVICE OF EVANGELIZATION

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St. Maximilian was a brilliant organizer. This is attested by his works, which grew on a wide scale in the country in the space of 20 years, acquiring international fame and continuing to develop to our day. They are: the religious association *Militia of the Immaculata*, the religious community of *Niepokalanow*, its mass media center, and the *mission in Japan*.

1. His organizational charism

a) The Militia of the Immaculata

The Militia of the Immaculata (MI) came into being at the International Franciscan College in Via San Teodoro, Rome. For the first two years it remained within the Franciscan family of the Friars Minor Conventual. It spread outside this context in Krakow, which for St. Maximilian was a new environment. At the age of 26, he did not yet have much experience of life nor of pastoral tactics, moreover he was obliged to struggle with the onset of tuberculosis. This was the period of a great economic depression when no one had any money for anything. Nonetheless, he managed to enable his institution to make headway. In 1939 the association had 750,000 members and was the largest in Poland, after Catholic Action.

The MI thus became an organization for the masses. This sociological concept corresponded with the emergence at that time of a new society that was open and for the masses, and in which great political and social organizations were springing up. Kolbe devised a formula for its organization at three levels:

- the Militia of the Immaculata *of the first degree* (MI.1);
- the Militia of the Immaculata *of the second degree* (MI.2);
- the Militia of the Immaculata *of the third degree* (MI.3), which was the association's most exalted and demanding structure.

In the period between the two wars, the definition of these three degrees in Maximilian Kolbe's institution was an innovation in the context of the Catholic Church.

b) Niepokalanow: a unique religious community

The community of Niepokalanow was a sort of 20th-century Franciscan republic, a modern and dynamic hub of Franciscan life and apostolic activity. It was not long before it became a beacon of life that attracted young people. In 12 years *Niepokalanow* (Mary's Town) became the largest religious community in the world. In 1939 it had 13 priests, 18 seminarians, 609 brothers and 122 boys at the minor seminary for missions.

The citizens of Niepokalanow had to be the best religious and their knights the most exemplary. "*With regard to the friars*", St. Maximilian said, "*I will require each one of you to strive to be the greatest of saints ...; this is why you came to the friary, to become holy*".

c) Niepokalanow: a press and editorial center

St. Maximilian courageously availed himself of the most modern methods of technology and organization that targeted the individual but immediately got through to the masses. He was constantly concerned to improve the means and methods of transmission, updating content and form to correspond to the level of the intended recipients. He also supervised the integration of groups and always strove to make organization a priority in his work.

Niepokalanow was soon to become the largest mass media center which existed in Poland at that time. Before the Second World War he published nine periodicals (one in Latin for priests across the world, called *Miles Immaculatae*, which today is the official publication of the MI International Center). He also published books, tracts, pamphlets, etc. He set up a radio broadcasting station with an autonomous editorial office and was even planning television!

d) The mission in Japan

Some biographers of St. Maximilian describe his departure for Japan as a great but ill-prepared venture. This is not entirely true. Although he did not study Japanese or the Japanese culture and mentality before setting out, he nonetheless prepared very carefully for his journey to the East. Although he held in high esteem cultural training for the purpose of evangelization, he considered the witness of his own life even more effective.

A month after his arrival – in May – he published the first issue of *Knight of the Immaculata* in Japanese; it was entitled *Muigenzai no Seibo no kishi*. It took him just a year to build the friary. In 1935 the community had 20 religious brothers (including four Japanese), two priests and two seminarians, who were ordained to the priesthood that same year. The print-run of *Muigenzai no Seibo no kishi* reached 65,000.

What was the secret of his charism for organizing? It involved various elements:

- first and foremost his rich personality;
- his own family environment;
- the environment of his religious family;
- but also his daring faith.

2. The anthropological and theological basis of the charism of organization

The most important theological truths and ethical principles, the features of his experience of religious life which had the greatest effect seem to be:

a) A dynamic approach to life

St. Maximilian presented the entire cosmos as a creation of God which continuously returns to him. In the process of returning to him, creation develops, is ennobled, perfected, and becomes "more divine". God and creation in a certain way constitute a common system in which life constantly pulsates, through a continuous two-way movement: from God and to God. "*Life is movement*", St. Maximilian wrote, "*the striving for a goal. God creates through love. The aim of creation is the return to God. The human person's love for God is both the purpose and a factor of development of every life. The aim of creation, the aim of the human being*", St. Maximilian continued, "*is the love of God, Creator and Father; a love that is ever greater, divinization, the return to God from whom man came, union with God, a fruitful love*".

b) The perfection of the Blessed Virgin Mary and an invitation to act

In the commitment to perfecting the self, to being supremely enriched *by the divine element*, the Blessed Virgin Mary outshone all the men and women who were, are and will be. She attained the highest degree of development possible for human creatures. She is "*the summit of the perfection of creation ... the most divine of all creatures*". She is the Immaculate Virgin. St. Maximilian was fascinated by the spiritual beauty attained by the Blessed Virgin with God's collaboration. In proclaiming the glory of the Mother of God, at the same time he expressed his own conviction of the value and dignity of all men and women.

c) Love of neighbor, a challenge for evangelization

Love of God and love of man are founded in the same love which is nonetheless expressed in different ways.

Love can regulate relations between peoples and nations at the highest level. In harmony with the content of the social Encyclicals of the recent Popes, St. Maximilian added the role of regulating social attitudes. In this way class struggles can be overcome....

Promoting good and facing evil: *the Knight is not indifferent to the evil that is spreading, but hates it with all his might and fights it on every occasion, in every place and in every time.*

d) Work, a factor that changes oneself and the world

St. Maximilian distinguished between three kinds of work: physical, intellectual and spiritual. Physical work is the easiest, intellectual work is more difficult, and spiritual work is the hardest of all.

Work changes man deeply and is at the root of every human act. External activity is only an outward expression, a reverberation of the inner person, of what is in his soul.

In his work St. Maximilian relived the spirit of St. Francis of Assisi who called all nature's elements by the name of brother or sister, even to the point of calling fire "Brother" and death "Sister". Thus in Niepokalanow the oldest printing press was

known as the “Grandmother”, the most powerful electric motor “Ursus”, and its predecessor, the “Grandfather”.

Human work has one dimension that could be called sacred. Without work – this is what he thought – man cannot reach God: *“the fruitfulness of work ... does not depend on ability, efforts, or money, although these too are gifts of God and are also useful for Catholic action, but depends solely and exclusively on the degree of union with God. If this is lacking, or if it weakens, all the other means are worth nothing. If, instead, the bond of union is alive, everything else will be found without difficulty”*.

This is what he said in a letter to a confrere who wanted to come to him in Japan: *“I write briefly, because I am too busy. Here our task is very simple: to slave all day long, to kill ourselves with work, to be considered almost crazy by our fellows and, exhausted, to die for the Immaculate Virgin”*.

e) Franciscan spirituality

“I have visited many nations”, he wrote, “I have seen so many things, I have talked to various people, but believe me: there is no better place to confront the evils of our time than in our Seraphic Order, if with courage, readiness, speed and constancy we develop the spirit of our father, St. Francis”.

He longed to return to God, not alone but with the greatest possible number of brothers and sisters, in a noble competition of emulation that might spur each one to become more perfect than the others. In his “Rule of life”, which he drafted during the spiritual exercises of February 1920, we read: *“I must be a saint, a great saint ... I will not neglect:*

- i) any evil without making reparation for it (destroying it) and*
- ii) any good that I can do or increase, or to which I can contribute in any way...”*

3. Elements of the charism of organization

a) A thorough search for collaborators and the sharing of tasks according to skills

Before the Second World War, this was how Niepokalanow was organized:

Its work as a friary-town was directed by a governing body made up of the director, superior (or Guardian) of Niepokalanow, its two vice-directors and the section heads who were responsible for other sections under them which, according to the type of work, could be divided into three different levels of organization:

- a. study section
- b. drafting section
- c. production section
- d. mailing section
- e. section for the examination of attitudes
- f. accounts section
- g. management secretariat

- h. administration of the MI International, MI National and of Niepokalanow
- i. administrative department
- j. fire brigade

b) Innovation and a spirit of initiative at the service of evangelization

"I will demand two things" of the work sections – he said during a conference he gave to the friars of Niepokalanow on 3 May 1939 – *"the greatest initiative and the greatest submission to the entire mechanism of Niepokalanow"*. Every means, every recent invention in the field of machinery and work systems was to give priority to the service of sanctifying souls through the Immaculate Virgin. He sensed that modern society is a society of information and communication. He used the press intelligently but was already organizing the radio, aiming for television, modernizing transport. One of his projects was an airport for Niepokalanow. He even planned to have two friars train to obtain a pilot's license.

The enemy of all progress is immobility.

c) Combining theory and practice

Like St. Francis, Fr. Maximilian appreciated friars who were dedicated to study, which helps to improve the quality of life. He encouraged the pursuit and development of professional qualifications – theology and spirituality, human and social sciences, so as to ensure the most appropriate pastoral action, to acquire a better knowledge of modern currents of thought and the milieus hostile to religion, assessing their *"origins, methods and effects, etc., and discerning the good and bad in them. There is no more efficient way to put an end to a bad movement than to identify whatever good there is in it and apply it immediately to our cause"*.

He dreamed of Niepokalanow as a special center for the study and dissemination of Marian thought and Mariology, an "Academy of the Immaculata" and an International Agency of the Militia of the Immaculata.

d) Environmental conditions and openness to change

St. Maximilian belonged to that group of idealists who are able to achieve their own ideas in spite of prevailing circumstances. Such people are capable not only of diagnosis, but also of making suitable proposals.

An example of this was his experience in Japan. The Order in this country *"can only be developed by the Japanese, and not by us foreigners. We are the seed that must die"*, he writes, *"so as to form indigenous religious of this country in accordance with our spirit. Only they can develop the action"*.

e) Knowing how to make use of the experience of others

He liked to visit publishers, printers, large religious communities, factories and exhibitions. He applied himself to acquiring a first-hand knowledge of the working methods of non-ecclesial, non-religious and even anti-religious institutions, to learn

from them how to be more influential. Open to criticism from friends and enemies alike, he wrote in his diary: *"today I sent the Rycerz to a good number of Protestant and Jewish publications, with a note saying 'please give your opinion'"*. He knew that it was necessary to add personal creativity to the experience of others. In a letter to Franciscan students, he wrote: *"Every generation must add its own effort and the fruits of this effort to those of the previous generations. What will we add?"*.

f) Public-relations in the service of the apostolate

"Public relations" is a term that seems to be a product of our times, but as a social phenomenon it has a long history. It can be defined in various ways. For our purposes, the following definition is adequate: *Public relations are intentional, planned and continuous efforts aimed at establishing and maintaining reciprocal understanding between organizations and their social context*. St. Maximilian applied these criteria at three levels:

Planning –A constant in the thought and action of St. Maximilian was: *"to prepare an action plan for the future"*. His project was ambitious, as can be seen from a letter of 1924: *"We must aim at this: the faithful Knights of the Immaculata must be everywhere, but especially in the most important places such as: 1) education (professors in scientific institutions, teachers, sports associations); 2) the management of public opinion media (journals, periodicals, daily newspapers, editorial and distribution staff, public and traveling libraries, etc., conferences, slide-shows and the cinema industry); 3) fine arts (sculpture, painting, music, theater); and lastly our Knights of the Immaculata must become pioneers in all fields and guides to the sciences (natural science, history, literature, medicine, law, exact sciences, etc.) Let industrial and commercial complexes, banks, etc. be founded and developed under our influence and with the help of the MI"*.

"In a word, let the Militia infiltrate everything and in a healthy spirit may it heal, strengthen and develop for the greatest glory of God, through Mary Immaculate and for the good of humanity".

Contact with the recipients and with the social context – He set up a feasible approach formula: door-to-door distribution of the press, public sales in the streets and visits to individual families. Every opportunity for dialogue on the Christian life and on the experience of religious life was developed in Niepokalanow. The religious hierarchy showed its appreciation.

Propaganda and promotional activities –

- *Militia of the Immaculata (MI) Week*
- *MI Sunday*, also involving the lay press. In 1938, for example, on *MI Sunday*, the Niepokalanow Center sent 80 articles to different religious monthlies, 54 to weeklies, 110 to daily papers and 29 to press agencies.

Contacts with influential personalities, with self-management committees and with Government representatives – St. Maximilian was very familiar with the mechanisms of social life. He knew that people in important public positions were essential to the forming of public opinion, individual and group decision-making. His

appeal to the mayors of the cities of Poland in support of *Rycerz Niepokalanej* is characteristic: *"Please use your influence on the people, at meetings and in conversation, to promote, involve and increase the readership of Rycerz Niepokalanej. For all this I express my cordial thanks, through Mary Immaculate"*.

To Fr. Marian Wójcik, who was preparing the first issue of *May Dziennik*, he wrote: *"I am of the opinion that it would be good to be close to government circles, to be more precisely informed of their approaches in order to influence them, at times, in their attitude to religious problems. One can do far more with personal knowledge than with violent criticism let fly from afar"*.

g) Competition and skill in overcoming difficulties

Competition is one of the sound principles of democratic life, in both economics and culture, and also between Christian movements.

Quoting the statistics of the religious association *Apostostwo Modlitwy* (Apostolate of Prayer): *"it has 35 million members. In 1936 1,501 new groups were created, in 1937, 1,621. The total number is 124,482"*, Fr. Maximilian ended with this affirmation: *"a certain rivalry is good. Let us pray that Mary Immaculate will bless the Jesuit Fathers and let us try to outdo them, not out of wickedness but to be able to help one another. They help us too. The most important goal is to spread God's glory. We have a lot to learn from them, both in humility and in working with harmonious love"*.

He used to say to himself: *"Do not let yourself be outdone by anyone in spreading the glory of God. I must be a saint, a great saint"*.

Conclusion

St. Maximilian: animator and leader.

As an animator, he reawakened the interest of his collaborators, stimulated their knowledge and broadened their experiences and emotions. In opening them to dialogue which extended to a multiplicity of topics, he inspired them to seek new ideals and new models of life.

As a leader, he knew how to suggest goals of action and the methods to achieve them, assigning tasks and defining the methods and the times in which to carry them out. He made the value of the person the focus of everything.

He was an excellent manager. His activity shows how the mass media – not always favorable to Christianity – science, competitive tactics and public relations can be put at the service of evangelization. Every invention, every achievement of the human mind can serve God and the development of humanity.

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