

KOLBE THE MAN: CONCRETENESS OF ACTION AND MARTYRLY TENSION

1. Kolbe the Man

It is not easy to discover the man after the Church placed the adjective "saint" next to his name, making us look at the heroic virtues, the divine action of grace, the extraordinary: humanity is almost hidden or seen as a reason to emphasize the virtue dominating it if not even destroying it.

A second problem in discovering the man in Fr. Kolbe is the friar's frock covering him, changing his name, giving him a way of living *sine proprio*, in chastity, obeying. To live this way could even mean destroying the man, from the view of who chooses as well as from who imposes.

The difficulty in discovering the man Kolbe can arise also from the Christian education he was raised in. Placed in inexperienced hands, in particular cultural environments, even Christianity, born to save man, may become inhuman, demanding a faith without reason, obedience without freedom, a life conditioned by thoughts of death.

Overcoming these three obstacles, we would like to see in Kolbe the man present in Christianity, in the friar, in the saint. Despite all this, Kolbe was a true man, with his smiling face, with his busy hands, with his slow steps towards the bunker of hunger; a man who, without even a tomb and whose ashes were dispersed by the wind, was and is a man.

On January 8th 1894, a man comes into the world with the name Raymond: bearing the last name of the father Jules and the strong love of the mother Maria Dabrowska, a Christian who imposes and self-imposes, together with the presence of the father who welcomes, smiles and accompanies him. A lively child, slightly rebellious like all of them, in an environment of poverty, of uncertainty in the future. The mother commands, the child listens, observes, thinks how to resolve his and his family's problems. Religion is sovereign, civic authorities are presented as being hostile in a Polish land subjected to Russia. They change home to better themselves; he leaves his family to go study in another country, Austria, in a religious environment where there is bread and the prospective of a better future.

The child becomes a youth: does well in his studies, surprises his teachers with his capabilities. Then he decides: a decision suffered; one must live for something, for someone. He freely formulates, with the strength of an adult, the decision to become a true Franciscan in a strange world, totally different from his own. He goes to Rome: in seven years the youth becomes a man; he will make his decision and become a priest. The man in him meets the world of philosophical and theological culture, but also that of the reality surrounding him: there is war, hunger, evil has many adepts, ideas become praxis: there is a gospel and a counter-gospel that dominates, which everyone must choose and follow.

In Rome, Kolbe the man from Austrian becomes Polish, and later in Poland he would begin to express his human capabilities despite the limitations placed on him by tuberculosis.

While teaching, he sued to say that there are three ages in every man: the preparation age, the working age, the declining age. Kolbe, the man who went throughout the world, reaches this last at the age of 47: prison, work camps, the death bunker, ashes in the wind. The man died.

But who was he really?

A great deal was said about this man: his mother, worried, follows him and is always spiritually close to him: writes to him, but her letters have disappeared. She receives and answers them, and the son's letters are kept by the mother and gathered later into the *Writings*. She lives for him, and Fra Maximilian is certain that he can count on her.

The friars see him and believe him to be disillusioned, an idealist, a dreamer, out of this world, less faithful to tradition; they arrive and judge him to be a dangerous man, not only because of his illness. At times, the superiors are perplexed, at times they make him take care of himself, control his initiatives; his friends, those who see better and live with him, see him as full of humanity, they feel that he is more than a brother, and they consider him a "father". He also calls "children" those he works with. It is difficult to discover the man under this frock, in these works; the Bishop of Nagasaki said the following to his secretary after the first encounter: "He is either a genius or mad".

What does he think of himself?

He is accustomed to look within himself, as he appears in what he writes: often he says he is good for nothing, a sinner, weak; he judges himself on the standards of the saints, recognizing his limitations, he puts himself to the service of an ideal; yet he obstinately asks for confirmation to not err. He writes about his life and aspirations in a diary with brief notes: he expresses what he thinks and often offers pondered advice; he speaks to the man, speaks about the man: he asserts the greatness in the creative action of God when making man in His image. It is interesting to see how he addresses himself as if facing another: Be humble, be generous, be man.

Like every human being, Kolbe has a life that develops physically, psychologically; he has a smiling face, a voice that speaks, hands that write, feet that walk, a missionary's beard. He is sick and tuberculosis makes him take long recovery periods, imposing limitations; yet he has an incredible strength. The soldiers that menace him are afraid of his gaze, and he would even manage to smile in the death cell. His body is at the service of his spirit, yet the spirit dominates him, his ailing body is not afraid and he professes his faith challenging the executioners and proclaims resurrection.

He is a young man who, with his intelligence, strives for truth in the Roman universities, having practical abilities he expresses in his actions; he owns a practical intelligence that reflects, projects, confronts, controls; intelligence will give him the material to write; he recognizes its need in every man with a mature faith; he excuses and accuses ignorance, error, pride that mortifies, interests that exploit. He manages to learn several languages to be able to dialogue, even if he cannot delve into them; he knows full well the "knowledge of the heart", which is associated to the knowledge of

the mind. He is a teacher for brief period of time, but he uses his intelligence for everything, with a great ability for logical coherence but, more so, with an intuitive force that often impresses those listening to him; he almost uses it as a premise to action. During the periods of inactivity in the hospitals, he reflects greatly; he is a good apologetic, but uses his intelligence above all as a capability at the service of human and divine truth through the articles he publishes.

Today, man is evaluated by his will power, by his creative abilities. Fr. Kolbe would know how to use his will not only in controlling himself but also to use his virtues decisively choosing the better over the good, welcoming the new in the traditional. He obeys yet proposes; his fundamental option leads him constantly to action: this is a *yes* to will, to a project of which he feels that he is the responsible executor. However this fundamental will may become sure and clear when the superior approves: even the superior becomes obedient to the Will of God and of the Immaculate, which Fr. Kolbe proposes. And how respectful he is of God's Will that he makes his own, so is he respectful of his fellow brothers' will who exhort and help in actions, in self-development, in giving oneself for love. Fr. Kolbe's will power surprises because it fears no obstacles, overcoming dangers.

But this will power stems from love. In St. Francis' school, Maximilian Kolbe asserts the primacy of love in God but also in man. Love is not only law, but also the constitutive element of each and every human being; only this force of love must be channeled into choosing the right object, opening to God, to good, to men. Fr. Kolbe's last gesture is an expression of the love that will give life, so that a condemned man may live freely.

The last trait of Kolbe the man is expressed by his relation with God. He is born and matures as a Christian and during his life makes this relation active as he discovers God in man: a God that searches, that loves, that gives, that praises. Only God constitutes the happiness towards which man – even unknowingly – runs to. In an ever more atheist world, Fr. Kolbe teaches that one is and one becomes a man with the love of God. In one of the proposals the very young Kolbe writes, he says: "*Be a man, be a Christian, be religious*". And he works among the man at home and in the world to help men learn and respect their humanity. For Fr. Kolbe being a man is a commitment, a way of realizing oneself, a sacred and human commitment to be achieved. And to save men, all men in all times and in every land is his ideal. In the Immaculate he finds the model of man redeemed in the fullness of God's Plan, She who is committed to bringing the man-God to men, the Savior of every creature.

2. Concreteness of action

A mother's teachings lead the child to collaborating in the best interests of the family, showing him that God gave life to men and tracing the path to follow in doing good. Then, there was no talk about "exploiting" children, but each one was asked to be useful according to their own strengths. Kolbe's mother would continue to indicate the path of work and service as the realization of God's Plan.

The child helping the family, going to school, when he would reach the brothers' house, he would learn Saint Francis' rule, which demands that the brothers

work and do so *fideliter et devote*, because to be able to work is a grace from God. While studying, he would also work and in the same way studying would be work: Fra Maximilian is not a pure speculator, but evangelically he would practice what he thought; his studying would be of service to “sow”, to cultivate, to build the great things requested of him by God: his own sanctification, the apostolate of salvation of the world, the contribution to achieve the greatest glory of God. He cannot forget his mother’s worried question: “What will become of you when you grow?” And waits for his place to work in the great field and plan of God.

What can a friar, a priest do?

It is hard to plan from faraway, and one must be waiting for the call to concreteness. In Rome, there was an experience of life that would lead the choice of the young deacon: to help Mary achieve Her mission among men, to bring Christ to them, He who crushed the serpent’s head, to come into the Divine Plan, which Mary was the model of. What to do? It would be shown to him year after year, the job to be accomplished: true Marian devotion is to become like Mary, always available, and to say with one’s works *I am the Lord’s servant*, it means offering the intelligence to act, hands to work with, heart to love as She did, with Her; to become a capable and generous instrument in Her hands.

What to do? All, always, in everything. He would not be an hourly worker, specialized in one job alone: every day he lives, all the gifts he has would go into service. A variety of commitments: professor or confessor, preacher or ailing person, writer, typographical worker or community organizer, all ways to achieve the grace of being allowed to serve.

Concreteness is suggested by three great forces: the existence of a world of brothers needing help, the love of the Immaculate Virgin, the reality of the gifts of intelligence, possibility and the grace which God placed in his hands. He cannot be in school because he is sick, and after a period of doubt, even the superiors take into consideration his proposals centered on consecration to Mary as the means to a fruitful apostolate. This is a concrete proposal: to be like Mary, to be saints like Mary and like Her to cooperate in the kingdom, to place in Mary’s hands one’s whole life, past, present and future. This is the concreteness of action: to form an apostolate able to carry forth this plan.

But interior consecration will not be sufficient: one must know how to unite also in the action. In the world, these “consecrated persons” form a great army that will unite in groups: religious, lay and young persons; the “Marian dinners” would come from this, schools of apostles.

Illness would make him do his apostolate through the written word: he fills the world with good press and by entering into the homes like this, tries to reach those far from the faith: the small typography comes from this, managed by a group of volunteers together with Fr. Kolbe, who would bring everywhere the voice of *The Knight of the Immaculate*. This new means of evangelization received a great impulse from Fr. Kolbe.

And then Niepokalanów, a community of specialized working brothers that surprised not only for the large amount of volunteers, but also for the working abilities of the brothers who live and work together. The old communities entrenched among the churches and the cells may become more lively, bustling, joyful, if expert hands are found, valid organizers, animators attentive to the working man, to the ideal, to the means. Here, not only Fr. Kolbe’s concreteness was manifested but also his geniality.

And only God knows how much works, prayers, misunderstandings, obstacles, how much courage, how much audacity were necessary.

Fr. Kolbe is brother to all, a citizen of the world, he who had citizenship in various countries; this is the missionary apostolate, because God is Father to all and the Gospel knows no boundaries. Fr. Kolbe takes the path of Rome to achieve being a missionary in the Orient. Concreteness is going personally, it is beginning oneself to make Mary known, through the press, to those who ignore Her. They are all Her children, She will save them.

Saint or madman? Genius or deluded? Mary is the way to meet Christ the Savior, and Kolbe follows Her; Japan is his new area of work, but he would like to go to all, wherever, and in a hurry.

Science and technology may become very useful means for evangelization. One must be aware that God also works through those who do not believe and the seed always sprouts. These concreteness would surprise the old friars, scandalize the devote: Fr. Kolbe looks faraway, he plans, uses, proceeds, works with the best machinery, with the fastest means, with the newest technologies. And he looks to the distant gifts, often to the poorest but also the richest in needs: Fr. Kolbe makes no difference between Christians, Jews, Masons, scientists, sages, the humble, the powerful.

Fr. Kolbe works, forms today's and tomorrow's operators, yet he knows that since man needs God, he also knows that his work would collapse if God hadn't blessed it, and would only remain human. Niepokalanów is a working center, a cenacle of communion, but it is also a place for prayer. And in this prayer, there is union between those who work and those who in the heavens, having finished their service, from up there help their brothers. Fr. Kolbe writes that work is a grace, a duty, a daily commitment for each and every moment. One works in everything, always.

Saint Francis' *De modo laborandi* is applied and practiced by Fr. Kolbe according to three maxims:

Our life is constant commitment to service: one must work with the mind, with the heart, with hands, with prayer and also with sacrifice.

One must work together, united, in an orderly way, in harmony of minds and ideals; this togetherness makes our work sure, easy and fruitful.

One must use all means, all human discoveries.

3. Martyrly tension

Fr. Kolbe received official exaltation from the Church especially because of his death; his saintliness is emphasized by the martyrdom. He was proclaimed Blessed by Paul VI in 1971 and Saint by John Paul II in 1982. He was a martyr of love that bears witness to the heroism in asking to die in the place of another innocent person. But this final gesture of his was preceded by many other moments of suffering, faced and overcome with heroic courage.

He knew suffering from the very start as a child, with the death of his brothers, with poverty, with his parents' work; he left the home he would no longer see; nor would he see his father anymore, who had gone to look for work and was condemned to death by the Russians for working towards the liberation of Poland; his mother

would leave for a convent. Maximilian Kolbe accepted all this and committed himself to live the religious Franciscan life: he knew full well that Saint Francis ended up with the stigmata from the Cross, and Jesus reminded the young Polish that to accept the rule of the Gospel means to take up the cross every day.

At Fr. Pal's first mass, his companion, he asks the celebrant to pray that he might become a martyr witness; and when in turn he would be at the altar, he would place the grace of martyrdom among his intentions. And a long martyrdom that marked even his common life with danger was his illness, if not *maxima poenitentia*, was made more difficult. And it is painful to reread the accusations and denunciations of many brothers; crosses of those having a mission to accomplish, but that add to the already serious effort to work for good. It is impressive to read about the effort, the work, the difficulties overcome to give birth and organize Niepokalanów in Poland and Mugenzai-no-sono at Nagasaki. Even some religious authorities bore down on the weight to try to understand whether he was mad or a saint. And after years of the activity's development, the tragedy of the invasion and the destruction of what had been built with so much effort. And then imprisonment, death.

Some believed that his gesture to die in place of another was a gesture of desperation, of being tired, of wanting to end it all, instead of being a martyrdom witness of love; the "devil's advocate" in the cause only later was convinced that the direct witnesses referred each detail about the days spent in the death bunker, where they prayed, sang of Mary, comforted brothers.

Martyrly tension: few perhaps knew like Fr. Kolbe the cruel face of human suffering and knew like him how to concretely face the problem of evil, of evil sin, of evil pain, injustice, ferocity, the organization of evil in the hands of diabolical powers. And in his spiritual and practical theological reflections he entered the mystery of pain calling it "school and force of love", expression of the negative choice of man, but almost a "necessary evil". Faced with the suffering of others the call to participation, to solidarity is born, which transforms Niepokalanów from a press house to a house of welcome, of refuge. Faced with the suffering of the just, of the innocent, one must participate increasing faith. Faced with one's own pain, one's own cross, one must accept it with joy, always offer it to God.

All the saints were heroes and heroism is revealed in the way they learnt to bear the cross. Fr. Kolbe is serene when facing the test, he learns to suffer for love, a love that makes the cross less heavy, which gives concreteness to his choices; a love that makes one humble, understanding, participate in the victory over evil. Martyrly tension therefore means making oneself the object and the subject of martyrdom in its dual understanding: destruction and death, gift of love and commitment to eternal life.

Fr Kolbe writes: Suffering revives the fire of love: suffer and work only for God and for His glory.

And from his writings, we can see Maximilian Kolbe's thinking. There are 961 letters, all that remains of a man who lived 47 years in dialogue with men, trying to help them serve the Lord, to live doing good, to follow the path towards the only joyous finality overcoming the difficulties of suffering.

Other precious writings are those he wrote for himself, pages of a diary where he traces the lines of the mission entrusted to him by God. He speaks about himself, as can be seen, how he would like to be; exhorting to follow Christ, to accomplish God's

Will, to operate with attentiveness, with courage, with perseverance, to perfection, to holiness.

He observes the world surrounding him, the Church that continues its mission as bearer of salvation.

He writes to those near and far to bring them closer to himself, not as much to create an orating choir but a work center for the evangelization of the world. He writes articles, plans. The man with the interior life becomes the builder of centers for the apostolate to bring the Word that saves to all men.

And still, writings that tell of the joy in giving to God and to men, not only the word but also blood: the suffering that repairs, makes the word fruitful, convincing of love. He writes down the crosses he must bear, the apparently useless days in the hospital, the joy of hope.

He prayed and asked others to pray for the grace of martyrdom for himself: when the occasion was presented to him, he accepted with joy, closing a life of witness and of love.

Witness of man of an interior world where holiness is achieved.

Witness of God who he loves with the heart of Mary.

Witness and martyr of men needing salvation and love.

Witness and martyr for fellow brothers to whom he continues to speak.

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