

# Father Maximilian Kolbe and the XX Century anthropological archetypes

Prof. Rocco Buttiglione

(Summary)

During the homily held at Oświęcim Brzezińska on June 7<sup>th</sup> 1979, John Paul II defined Maximilian Maria Kolbe the “patron of our difficult century”. He did this after having paused and prayed at the location of his martyrdom.

This contribution is simply an attempt to better understand the indication coming from this homily. What does it mean when saying that Father Kolbe is the patron of our difficult century? How does his story have an exemplary significance to such a point that we are all entrusted to his protection, we who belong to this century that has just ended?

- The XX Century is the century of world wars.
- The horrors of the XX Century cannot only be explained by the growing power of instruments of destruction used by evil will of individuals and nations.
- More so, the natural ferociousness of human beings was not only legitimized and liberated. It was reinforced by the feeling of moral duty, the sentiment that for so many centuries had opposed and contained it. Solzhenitsin explains that this was the force of ideology.

The difference between Ivan the Terrible and Stalin or Hitler is not of an individual type or even a difference in power. Stalin and Hitler were the ministers of an ideology, of a faith in the possibility of establishing a perfect society on earth. To achieve this perfect society however, the price to be paid was in blood. During the XX Century, therefore, the path of civilization is overturned, the path that God gave back to Abraham Isaac and, thus, put an end forever to blood sacrifices. Since then, the followers of religions that derive from the seed of Abraham learned (or at least should have learned) that whoever demands the sacrifice of human blood is not God. St. Irenaeus of Lyons formulated the same principle at the beginning of the Christian era, when he wrote that "gloria Dei vivens homo" (the glory of God is living man and not the dead body, or, according to a different tradition, the glory of God is that man lives and not that man dies).

- Reflections on the XX Century must also be, at the same time, reflections on the diabolical. To understand the psychic as well as anthropological structures that have guided and made the evil of our century possible, we must imagine spirits of ascetics that have chosen evil not the same absolute and mystical determination that the great saints chose for God.

This inversion in the order of values emerges in Europe and is progressively spread to all corners of the earth. This means that XX Century history is still an essentially European history and rotates around the question of Christianity.

- In the overturning of values, the other is seen as a limitation of self-conscience, a limit that must be annihilated and destroyed, leaving the other to a role as servant or as an instrument for the achievement of one's plan in the world.

- Solzhenitsin wrote that all this came about because we forgot God and Augusto Del Noce placed the problem of atheism at the center of his philosophical consideration on contemporary times. The man that loses God the ultimate reference point for his acts no longer can find himself. This does not mean thinking about God as a sort of judge and policeman for world order. Rather it means thinking of God as a Father. Dialoguing with Him, I discover my destiny and I learn how to come into contact with the reality of my world, yet I do not know how. If the Biblical reference to paternity is not accepted, in a society where by many aspects the sense of paternity has been lost, we could use the word Friend. Each of us discovers the truth about oneself speaking about ourselves with someone else who is just a little bit in front of us on the path of life.

The dialogue with God introduces man to the depths of his own heart. The century that forgets God no longer finds its way leading towards these depths. Who, more than anyone else, discovered and suffered this inevitable consequence of atheism was F. Nietzsche, and perhaps in this knowledge lies the basis of his philosophical folly. The new man who is born no longer has a center or a depth and because of this the distinction between wisdom and folly also disappears. It is the dizziness that is achieved, under water at great depths, the inexperienced person who cannot distinguish the direction that leads towards the surface from what leads to the bottom.

This loss of self is the cross, to which the XX Century man is nailed. John Paul II points to Maximilian Maria Kolbe as the patron of this difficult century, as a father and friend with whom to dialogue for our orientation and to be lead once again towards our inner depths.

- Why then does John Paul II recommend dialogue with this historical figure rather than another, even if the XX Century Church and mankind's history is full of this richness? Certainly the death he was subjected to strongly impresses our spirit and makes up an example of such eloquence that no human spirit can remain indifferent to it.

- On one hand, *Kolbe is a model of priestly holiness*. In fact, he helps his fellow companions and offers his life for a layperson. In the sacrifice of mass, the priest becomes as Christ, offers the sacrifice *in persona Christi*, for the people and for their salvation. Kolbe repeats this sacrifice with his blood and lives to the end of priesthood offering himself for the people and therefore as a martyr.

- On the other hand, he is a *symbol of reconciliation among people*. As a Catholic priest, Kolbe goes to die a Jew's death in a lager where nine tenths of the victims were Jews. Polish, Kolbe did not detract himself to the limitations of culture during his times and shared the anti-Semitism present in the popular Polish culture of his times. A saint does not cease being a man of his times; he is not free of limitations. What characterizes a saint is the fact that he places his own limitations in God's hands so that God may purify them and in some way make them useful to His Kingdom. Because of this, there is a deep symbolic significance in the fact that Father Kolbe achieves his sacrifice at Oswiecim and in the hands of those who would kill millions of Jews. We must recall, also, the nation that suffered the most from the Second World War was the Polish nation, right after the Jews.

- These symbolic dimensions are present in the mind and heart of John Paul II at the time of the great homily on June 7<sup>th</sup> 1979. However, they are not enough to understand completely the indication of Kolbe as the patron of our difficult century. We must place the figure of Kolbe in the backdrop of Auschwitz and what the debate on the philosophical meaning Auschwitz had for XX Century man's self-conscience.

I believe that two elements in Kolbe should be underlined in a particular way, in the reasoning we are applying now.

The first of them being the *knightly characteristic of his spirituality*. Man's life is a battle between good and evil. This agonistic concept of Christian life deeply corresponds to the Polish spirit and temperament, proper to a nation that recognizes owing its greatest victory, that with which it identifies the national spirit today, to the protection of Our Lady.

- The second point being *the choice of fighting for truth*, which in itself is already a result of grace, creating the occasion in which God may intervene exalting the humble and abasing the proud. However, a spiritual victory exists, which is different from the mundane success and which may be consequential even in failure and in the apparent triumph of evil. The dualism of victory and success corresponds to that of authority and power. Power decides the mundane success but Authority is what leads to the choice for truth and good which is the authentic victory of man, which preserves and increases his humanity.

- Another fundamental aspect in Kolbe is the *Marian one*. Father Maximilian is a knight but a *knight of the Immaculate*. Kolbe's Marian devotion contains a complete vision of man. We could define it in the following way: truly free is not he who does what he wishes but who bonds himself in love and accepts bearing another human being in his heart to lead it to eternal life. Contemporaneously, this means accepting being held in another person's heart to be generated to eternal life. Mary achieves Her destiny by obeying: "according to thy word" which anticipates the "Thy Will be done" in the Our Father. And Mary's destiny is to serve the Father's Plan and the Son's Destiny. In Jesus' destiny, His mother's is entirely reread. The anthropological error of the XX Century instead consists in thinking that man can realize himself without giving himself. The dominating philosophies of the century, on the other hand, reach the point of identifying self-giving in any form with self-alienation.

Mary's attitude is re-proposes on the anthropological level the mystery of living in another and for another that is at the basis of communication of the persons in the Trinity. At the same time, we are also at the roots of the idea of an individual.

- *Father Kolbe's martyrdom, finally, should be placed in the Auschwitz backdrop*. Auschwitz is a symbol for the contemporary world.

The concentration camp is not only built to destroy the enemies of power in the cruelest way. It has a didactic and pedagogical function. It must show that man, any man, is but a piece of flesh that belongs entirely to the world. The concentration camp is built contrary to the idea of human transcendence and as an empirical demonstration of its falsehood. Man fundamentally obeys an ensemble of physical and carnal stimuli, and that is the end of it. In this sense, there is an undeniable similarity between the function of the concentration camp in totalitarian order and the function of the cross in the Roman empire/slave order. The cross was the torture of slaves. Liberated man, the warrior, the philosopher (think about Socrates) could defy death to defend one's convictions or dignity, but nobody could defy the cross. Auschwitz is symbolically the

cross of the XX Century and Maximilian Maria Kolbe is the man who, entrusted to Christ through the Immaculate, overturns the meaning just as Jesus' sacrifice overturned the meaning of the cross in history. Kolbe shows that even in concentrations camps, the act of recognition of truth in man is possible and that, therefore, man is essentially made for truth and good in such a way that no manipulation can estrange him from this root.

Kolbe's victory is not only a victory of Christian faith. In the official version of John Paul II's speech at Oswiecim published in the *Osservatore Romano*, a *victory of faith* is mentioned. But the words pronounced by the Pope are different: "dokonało się szczególne zwycięstwo człowieka przez wiarę", that is to say, "a particular victory of man has been achieved through faith". Through faith and grace, the affirmation of the communion nature of man as well as the affirmation of truth about God, who is Love, has become possible, the one that states that the concentration camp and, in it, the ideologies of the XX Century attempted to deny.

The decision to recognize Kolbe's title to martyrdom makes us go further into the reasons for which he has been pointed out as a patron. The events of the XX Century have, at times, opposed the cause of God to the cause of man. It might have seemed that the Church was an enemy of freedom and that what was attributed to God was in some way taken away from man. In Kolbe's martyrdom, the witness given about truth on God and that given on the truth on man are inseparably joined.

The XX Century was for the Church a time of great witness and of the witness given before a mundane power and against worldly power. The Church accompanied man on the cross of the XX Century and has rediscovered that the only blood that can be shed in defense of truth is that of its martyrs. Father Maximilian Maria Kolbe preached and bore witness with all the means that his flexible genius could pinpoint: he was a journalist and a manager of communication. At the end, he was asked to bear witness through blood just like Stanislaw, the bishop and saint of Krakow. Wojtyła, the poet, presents him to us while reflecting on his own vocation as minister, bishop and witness, and places these words in his mouth: "What the word has not been able to do, perhaps blood will".