

MAXIMILIAN KOLBE AND HIS TIMES

Those organizing this convention thought of entrusting the introductory report not only to a poor Christian (which does not create any great damage) but to a contemporary historian: yes, interested in the role of the Church between the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, but worried about international relations and the great political and cultural questions of our era. Perhaps he should have chosen a theologian, a liturgist or even a jurist for the many institutional aspects inherent in the many initiatives made by this Franciscan. Instead, we want to see Father Kolbe with the eyes and sensitivities of today's man, starting from the framework of his experiences to, if possible, come closer to the heart of the problems, the internal dynamics that characterized him.

Therefore, here is the first and most external consideration. Father Kolbe is part of that category of persons who, in our unending Twentieth Century (a very long century if it is true that historical time is not susceptible only to abstract chronography, but careful and participating pondering) gave their lives for their friends. From a historian's point of view, there is the risk that Kolbe's last earthly sequence may be turned over, crushing it and making it illegible, rather than his long-term reasons. Kolbe, like Salvo d'Acquisto, the Franciscan and the "carabiniere" united in the gesture of supreme love for others of an effective and specific human condition. But as we can go back to the origins and the motives of the military person's final decision, so must we rediscover the long path that brought the Franciscan to Auschwitz and to the end of a problematic commitment in history. The sacrifice, for the historian, cannot be only an unexplainable flash of light, but it must be decomposed and refracted, with the care to understand the reasons and the possible alternatives at the moment of decision.

Then, Kolbe the Polish man. Born in the Russian section of this land, the most ill-treated and badly governed of the three parts Poland had been divided into, we must not stop at the hurried description of those places, labeling him with the usual epithets such as *noble*, *cavalier*, *martyr* and anything else allowing us to go beyond. This is the same problem Karol Wojtyla mentions: apart from the usual phrases how is his Polishness extrinsic? What is the meaning of the rebirth of Polish freedom in the Twentieth Century, during the two seasons of reconstructing national and state unity and fending off communism? And then the shadows: Poland as the first theater of the holocaust, Poland the land of the disappearance of its ancient Hebrew component, silently and, worse yet, with the coldness of the souls of the fellow Polish?

Therefore, the place and the role of Mary, the true queen of Poland forever, even when the name of this land had been cancelled from the political map of Europe. Today,

we may find her name born even in the Pontifical Seal, for the first time in the millennium. But what was the meaning, for a believer and a patriot, of referring to Her during the dark years of foreign domination and then, in the programmed slavery of the Polish people? Should we entrust this necessary pre-understanding to traditional Mariological studies or should we – so to speak – incarnate them in a place and time?

Finally, the year 1917, still incisive to history, inspiring few men deprived of human power, to dedicate themselves to the Immaculate and create the foundation of a service, a Militia as was often said, in the language of those times . . . Yet we cannot expect the historian to avoid looking up and place his attention on this terrible year. 1917: the first Russian revolution, the one that crushed the Tsarist autocracy, American intervention, the military crisis of the Entente with in Italy the defeat of Caporetto, the second Russian revolution and the power to the Bolsheviks. And on the other hand, Fatima and the pontifical message “to the heads of the belligerent nations”, not inane pleadings for peace, but a severe judgment on the reasons for war (this is the “*useless extermination*”) and the proposal for a radical renewal of relations between the peoples and the States: all coincidences, dictated by chance?

Let us listen to what Father Kolbe said about Pope Benedict XV and his Church: «he was a benefactor of humanity. His great heart embraced the entire world, Christians and pagans, Catholics and Protestants or Reformists. He went throughout the world doing good for all, drying tears, easing suffering and caring for the wounds of all (...). For the Polish people Benedict XV still is of great importance, because he was a friend of Poland; his love for our country never waned»¹. Another coincidence, with another Pontiff who from Rome makes a proposal for the oppressed nations, thus changing the place as well as the role of the so-called “rich nations”?

Couldn't we at least take into consideration that we are facing a turning point of human history, a moment of unveiling and acceleration where even the humble Polish Franciscan's initiative may be placed (said without any pretense)? But the historian must establish a link with other similar religious experiences, taking place contemporaneously, in our Italy as well as in Western Europe: the consecration of the Italian army of the Sacred Heart. Wanted and carried forward by a group of Christians, we should recall Miss Armida Barelli and the captain, doctor and psychologist of the State, Father Agostino Gemelli, another Franciscan. Personal and familial consecration, promise of faithfulness, prayer, attending the sacraments, placing an image or an icon in the homes, in the Church... General Cadorna was asked to wear a symbol on his uniform, but he refused, attaching — despite his and the entire managerial group of the Superior Command's lively religiosity — which was always the Royal Army and not

¹ SK 1002, p.1773.

the Papal one. Result: the sign was born by two million friends, but under the gray-green jacket.

Therefore the Militia of the Immaculate is not alone, it is not a rare or episodic flower. The Great War taught us that the world now belongs to the masses, no longer spread throughout the country and entrusted to the rhythms of nature, but concentrated in the armies and in the industries, organized and disciplined, evermore knowledgeable of their own force and possibilities inherent to the mix of technology and will of social palingenesis. Is the old ecclesial structure, the parish, the diocese, religious orders casually spread throughout the territory, adequate in facing the challenge that freewheeling Communism, Nationalism and capitalism carry on? In all simplicity, the believers then say that the Spirit faces the needs of the historical moment furnishing innovative models; the layperson wishes to answer this challenge through a healthy and vital organism answering with the necessary adaptation and change. The Age of Reform, not mentioning others, shows a vast number of cases. And then, during the *entre deux-guerres*, the sequence becomes: a founder, with an intuition on the hour at hand and on the direction that could and must be followed; a group of adepts; aggregation of consensus by example and word, vocal or written; the associative formula; the spreading in time and space; the relation, which is recognition and not foundation of the substance, with the ecclesiastic institution that sanctions and corrects without interfering (too much) in the original inspiration, but harmonizing it with principles, with the timeless knowledge, with the opportune placement in context.

The historian may also be useful by untying a sort of lexical knot, which today may seem difficult and harmful. Christ the King, Mary the Queen, militia, knight, crown..., an entire terminology that, in the post-Council era and at the beginning of the new Millennium, seem to be out of place. Yet when the *Milites Christi* of Giuseppe Lazzati appear, and this already after the Second World War, no one feels up to contrasting this. Even the religious habits are products of a time long gone. But do we have the right to diminish the *forms* of religious experience of the generations that preceded us? Are we so certain that the way of living was inferior in quality to ours? For a long period of centuries, the military marked the life of men. Today things have changed, but next to so much pain and misery, we must not forget the values of dedication, of discipline and, yes, of our the sacrifices our elders lived through, though less well cared for, nourished and with briefer lives. And we hope that the course of history will not challenge us to demonstrate, as it did with the fathers and with the ancestors, what substance we are made of and how we would react if challenged by the newly unleashed power, like what happened during the first of the Twentieth Century.

Finally, on completion of the picture of the era traced until now, how Franciscan is Kolbe. We have already mentioned Gemelli, but couldn't it be fortuitous that the sons of Saint Francis, in the various branches of the family, occupy forefront places during the Twentieth Century. Also, Manzoni had already shown us in his Father Christopher, who generations of readers have pinpointed as the model of a priest: courageous, disinterested, obedient to the point of renouncing of self, resigned only in the hands of God. In truth, Manzoni proposed another Franciscan to us in the eve of his great novel: that Father Felice Casati, who the fearful civic authorities had left to manage Milan's leprosarium, and the management of the plague epidemic in the city and in the territory. This Manzonian model is prophetic: the war, the fall of civil regulations, the fleeing of the powerful (always busy with State and power matters), the misery and the desperation of the masses. Even in Auschwitz things did not go too differently... Always in using the transparent military metaphor, it is up to the foot soldiers, that is to say the Franciscans, to occupy and hold the territory, with the costs we all know. Kolbe's "missionarity" comes into play here. Japan, a non-Christian and even non-religious land (at least in the eschatological and salvation tradition of our world), seems to be the future port for us post-Christians, often searching for a wisdom that goes beyond prophesy and revelation. Kolbe and his friends speak about Christ, the Immaculate, their proposal for existential dedication — this is the true substance of the Militia! — in a world spiritually very far from the land of origin: from the most Catholic Poland, where religion has remained (more than the language) the only uniting element of a culture undergoing a lengthy and coherent centrifuge. Kolbe is truly in a land of mission but, if he had survived Auschwitz, he would have known the existential derivations of our times. Of course, between hypothesis and reality, he would always maintain the roots of the Franciscan option, a poor weapon by definition, yet capable of speaking directly to the hearts of men, as far away as they might appear to be.

On October 17th 1917, while history was writing decisive pages in the framework of time, a group of Franciscan Friars Conventual founded the Militia of the Immaculate. They were Italian and Polish, the last of the great and proud European nations. The Statute consists in a single page, which is too well known among the friends to repeat here. It enounces a project moving from the older Marian devotion into contemporary matters: conversion of others, those faraway, may they be tired and confused pilgrims in the world, bearers of other ideologies, of other visions of man and his meaning, with an explicit reference to the "masons", the same persons that young Kolbe would have liked to convert with a simple, direct allocution to their highest ranks. Conversion is accomplished by the total giving of self to the Immaculate and the use of the "Miraculous Medal", Catherine Labouré's where the two hearts of Jesus and Mary

appear under the Cross with transparent symbolism. Also, there is the will to «use all the legitimate means, according to the different states and conditions of life, in the occasions that come up...».²

All legitimate means: this means going to those far away, to the greatest number of these, concretely using the personal example of Franciscan poverty and commitment, and the mass communication media prevalent at the time, the press. Later, the Knights would use the radio, a premise for future innovation. From this, the “Knight of the Immaculate”, a folio that would grow patiently and slowly during the Thirty’s, reaching about one million copies. Then, the “City of the Immaculate”, a well-determined place, gradually edified for the publication of a chain of distinct folios, divided by age and social condition, a real city since at the beginning of the Second World War there were over seven hundred Franciscan adepts, as well as a center, in faraway Japan, in Nagasaki, for a similar operation in the Asian continent. Poland and Japan, Auschwitz and the atomic bomb... we cannot go into the parallels of these “facts” without a quiver that the historian cannot translate within the exorbitant prospectus of his method yet must nevertheless register and consign to the freer meditation of those on the outside.

The means do not finish here. Even Father Kolbe would say in 1937: «every means, every last invention in the field of machinery or systems of work should above all be placed at the service of the sanctifying work on souls through the Immaculate. Limiting personal needs to the maximum, leading a life in the strictest poverty we will be able to use the most modern means available».³ There is no fear of technology, like the fear that reigned among believers, it too can – and must – be placed at the service of a holy and worthy project. Even within the City of the Immaculate and its “production”, the most efficient styles in the world are available, certainly converted towards the finalities we well know. Reference to the industrial leader of the time is not surprising, the automobile industry with its master Henry Ford, the father of a relational and productive style, very widely imitated by every ideology. But Kolbe manages to spiritualize even the arid American, and draw a lesson even from an experience, theoretically distant: «Ford would fire those who thought they had already become masters and stopped making efforts to find an ever more rational method of working».⁴

Kolbe’s flight from the world is therefore very particular: he knew how to appreciate the work of men, praised progress and innovation, used planes (possibly “the latest”) but all ordained and finalized for Christ through the mediation of the

² Cfr. SK 991 Q, p.1730; 1226, p. 2158.

³ SK 1218, p. 2126.

⁴ SK 579, p. 1087-1088.

Immaculate. The *contemptus mundi* of tradition opens towards work, exalting and transfiguring it in personal and social sanctification. This is how consecration becomes a sort of self-expropriation in favor of the “Lady” of the Knights, Her “absolute property”. Sanctification as the premise for sanctification of others, and in this sense is located in an otherwise surprising judgment: «suffering, working and dying as knights, not by a common death but, for example, by a bullet in the head»⁵... The important point is another: «life (in every moment), death (where, when and how) my eternity, all is yours, o Immaculate Virgin. Do what you will with me»⁶.

Everything is yours, *totus tuus*: the historian cannot register the inspiration of a motto that has become famous since 1978.

Sanctification as the finality, forgetting oneself, personal poverty, exaltation of the creative potential of the individual and the social organization are concentric circles of Kolbe’s proposal. To this we must add a horizon of faithfulness to the Church, certainly not common at the beginning of the Millennium, and a truly filial relation with the Franciscan order and the conventual branch of the great tree of the sons of the Saint from Assisi. Nothing was easy then, but there was no serious threat: more proof of the strong sense of belonging and of the “natural” militancy of Kolbe and his followers. The acknowledgement of the Marian centrality in the robust tradition of the Franciscan Order arose during the Thirties. All that the Polish father’s work revealed, not creating, a secular potentiality and made it history within the problems and potentials of this terrible Twentieth Century. And in fact, the problem, to this Polish friar, is the dual role of witness and star of our time. He is not a saint who once elevated, as once was said, to the glory of the altars, would remain up there in a certain sense, in the devotional iconography, loved by followers, revered by the faithful. Kolbe, in a certain sense, is the emblem of the human condition of the entire century, and it should suffice to quickly go through his existential sequence to convince oneself of this.

A subject of the Tsar yet a Polish patriot, with a father who chose to fight for the freedom of his country, fought with Pilsudski and was put to death. A brother died from an illness, another died with him at Auschwitz: a place that marks contemporary history like a brand. When woman is emancipated, he becomes a knight of Mary, which is an elevated and different model with respect to the current ones. He is Polish and sees beyond his fragile Eastern boundaries, the Communism becoming State, and great power, and thinks and dreams – we have proof of this – of a possible return of Russia to Christianity. In Japan, he goes to Nagasaki, another place that imposes reflection and stupor. He builds a communication system of values in which he firmly believes, based

⁵ SK 31, p. 333; 32, p. 335.

⁶ Cfr. SK 1331, p. 2354.

first on the press and then on the radio, which then became a mass media. He thinks about the new society looking out upon the world, definitively coming out of isolation and the secular resigned silence. Kolbe, to us, cannot but be an edifying image. Rather, he is a mirror that reflects with dramatic efficacy the face of contemporary man, animated by the highest and most fruitful faith, yet always marked by the hopes and the falls of the closing century of the millennium. His martyrdom, even in the exasperated extreme circumstances of the occurrence, concerns and involves us as well, and it involves us just as the assault of relativism becomes tighter and disorients the fathers' inheritance.

Giorgio Rumi

