

Contents

Blessed Maximilian Kolbe 1
 Reflections on Holy Scripture 11
 Christmas and Salvation 13
 Poetry 25
 Mary at Bethlehem 27
 Prayer to St. Joseph 30
 For Children of All Ages 31
 The Church or the Bible 33
 The Divine Maternity 43
 Scientia Sanctorum 46
 The Vision and Vocation of Orestes Brownson 47

Saint Benedict Center

To Our Readers:

The mystical life of the Church is a cycle of Joys, of Sorrows, and—for those who fight to the very end—of Glories. Glories of ultimate triumphs. Every faithful Catholic can live this mystical cycle on a small scale by contemplating the mysteries of the complete Rosary. But the Church lives it in the liturgical year with her spiritual seasons of Christmas, Passion Week, and Easter.

With our patron and exemplar for this issue, Blessed Maximilian Maria Kolbe, a saint of our times who shared our battle against the very same enemies and for the very same goal, we approach this Christmas with unbounded joy. For Christmas makes us realize the significance of God's plunge into our world, to make our battle His own.

We ask for ourselves from Our Lady the grace to see in Christmas the pledge of assured victory for those who struggle to "teach the Faith to every creature," and thus labor to bring salvation to every soul throughout the world. And we pray the same for all our readers.

Wishing you all a Happy and Holy Christmas

Faithfully, in the Immaculate Heart of Mary,

Brother Francis, M. I. C. M.

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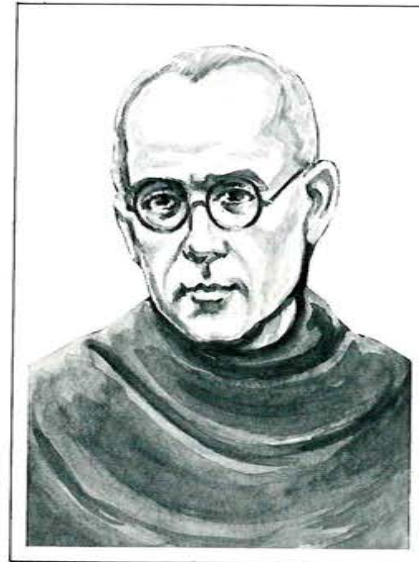
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Blessed Maximilian Kolbe

Our Lady especially loves little children. They are so guileless, so direct. Their faith is so simple and chaste, their hope so aspiring and inspiring, their charity so warm and sincere, that She could not help but

vate and very intimate. One such highly personal visitation occurred shortly after the turn of the present century.

It happened in Poland. The ten-year-old child who received this exceptional blessing was not exceptional himself—at least not in virtue. For he was as mischievous as any other boy of his age. Perhaps even more so. His name was Raymond Kolbe, born January 8, 1894. But while he might not have been called exceptional, neither was he average. Raymond was a bright little fellow with a notable inclination toward science.



Unfortunately his talents were applied to common mischief far too frequently to suit the patience of his poor mother, and he received many a just reprimand from her. Exasperated, she one day intoned that typical expression which many a weary mother has used dozens of times over: "What is going to become of you?" she asked her youthful prankster. Poor Raymond took the question quite to heart, gravely reflecting on the implication that his habits of misbehavior were leading him to a disastrous end. So

love them above the rest of men. No doubt that is why She so often chooses them to convey Her heavenly messages to the world.

But sometimes Her apparitions to children are meant to be very pri-

moved was he, in fact, that a complete change came over him from that moment.

And it was very noticeable. Maria Kolbe began to observe her son spending long hours at their little altar of Our Lady of Czestochowa praying and weeping. Naturally concerned about what was troubling the boy, she asked him what was the matter. Raymond was reluctant to open his heart until his worried mother insisted that he tell her under pain of disobedience. Then he confided that her critical question about the hope for his future had been the start of it all: "I felt very sad and went to the Blessed Virgin and asked Her what would become of me. After that, I asked Her again in church. Then the Blessed Virgin appeared to me, holding two crowns. One was white, and the other red." The white crown represented purity, and the red one martyrdom. Our Lady then asked him which he would choose. "I choose them both," was his eager answer. The Queen of Heaven then smiled and disappeared.

Thus Maria Kolbe became the only person to share the beautiful secret of this future saint before his death. And having been taken into his confidence, she related years later, "His face aglow, he would often talk to me of martyrdom, his great dream."

But how was this dream to be fulfilled? The vision was brief, and the only apparent instruction that Our Lady gave Raymond was that he be obedient and She would take care of everything else.

The Religious Life

Jules and Maria Kolbe were a poor Polish couple. Poverty, for that matter, was a national characteristic of oppressed Poland in those days when the pitiable country was torn apart and its remnants divided among three neighboring powers. The Kolbes therefore had no money to send their three sons to school, and had to teach the boys elementary reading and writing from their own humble literary abilities. Francis was the oldest of the children and naturally he was entitled to whatever educational privileges might become possible in the household. So when it was decided that Francis would enter the seminary, the rest of the family prepared themselves to make every sacrifice necessary to achieve that ambition. This meant that Raymond, who was the second oldest, would have to remain at home and help in his father's trade.

But the Blessed Mother had other plans for her young visionary. A local pharmacist was impressed by the precocious lad, and volunteered to tutor him. With the help of this chemist-angel, Raymond was able to join his older brother who was attending the secondary school at Leopoli.

Before long the two were admitted to a minor seminary in Galicia, run by Conventual Franciscans. Their younger brother Joseph followed them three years later. Then, with all three of their children in the seminary, both parents decided to enter religious life and devote themselves to God.

Raymond meanwhile developed a brilliant aptitude for studies, particularly excelling in mathematics and physics. Even during his years at the minor seminary, he already was formulating designs for interplanetary flight—designs that he would continue to perfect in his spare time until they were feasibly workable. Father Bronislaus Stryczny remembered years later: "He told me many times that flight to the moon is possible and that he expected to see it in his own lifetime. . . . His own plans which he drew up were so plausible and well worked out that one of his professors suggested that he patent them." This inventive genius was to be a great blessing later in his career.

In 1910 he was received into the novitiate of the Conventual Franciscans, taking the name Maximilian as a religious. And the following year, after making his temporary profession, he was sent to study philosophy at Krakow, Poland, where his superiors, realizing his exceptional capabilities, decided to have him complete his studies at Rome. There he had the happy opportunity of seeing Pope Pius X in public audiences, although probably neither saint was aware at the time that another one was present. Friar Maximilian studied at the Gregorian Institute and the International Seraphic College, where he was to earn his doctorates in philosophy and theology. In 1914 he took his solemn vows, adding "Maria" to his religious name. Four years later he was ordained to the priesthood.

Militia of the Immaculate Mother

The education that Blessed Maximilian acquired in Rome was considerably more than what could be gotten in classrooms or from textbooks, and not always was it edifying. He had come there quite innocent of the ways of the world, only to be rudely awakened to the painful realities of the modern times.

Modernism, though now exposed and condemned by the great Pope Saint Pius X, still left enough of its atmosphere lingering in the Eternal City to show its widespread effects on the thinking within the Church. Reflecting on those times many years later, Father Kolbe recalled: "I would often talk with my confreres about the lack of enthusiasm of some within the Order and about the future of the Order. It was then that these words were impressed on my mind: 'Refuse to compromise, or we will destroy the Order!'" For, as one of his associates commented, "Even as a student Maximilian Kolbe felt it was necessary to repel the trend against the Traditions of the Church in order to help men find their way to God."

At the same time there were the increasingly brazen and blasphemous outrages of the Communists and the Masons directed against the Faith. Conspicuous among them was the ugly spectacle of militant thugs celebrating the secondary centenary of Freemasonry by marching on the Holy City, and waving signs that read: "Satan must reign in the Vatican. The Pope will be his slave."

Deeply grieved by many other

symptoms that the Church steadily was losing ground in her battle against the devil, and fired by his naturally warrior-like spirit, Blessed Maximilian had already determined in his heart to organize a spiritual army to capture souls for the Immaculate Queen. That inspiration came to him in 1917 on the anniversary of Our Lady's apparition to Alphonse Ratisbonne, a Jew who was converted through the Miraculous Medal. But his ideas had no real shape before he personally witnessed the sacrileges of Satan's disciples. The holy man recounts this experience: "The Freemasons began to spark their demonstrations with more and more effrontery, even raising their banners under the windows of the Vatican—banners which depicted on a black background Lucifer trampling underfoot the Archangel Michael. When they started to distribute vicious tracts against the Holy Father, the idea to establish a company to fight the Freemasons and other agents of Lucifer was born."

The specific aim of this company, this Militia of the Immaculata, he said, would be "to convert sinners, heretics, and especially Masons,* and to sanctify all under the patronage and through the intercession of the Immaculate Virgin Mary." To be a Knight of this holy Militia would require "total consecration of self to the Immaculate Virgin Mary as an implement in Her Immaculate

hands" and "wearing the Miraculous Medal."

Membership in the *Militia Immaculatae* eventually would be open to people from all walks of life. But for his first select recruits Friar Maximilian turned to his Franciscan confreres. "A bishop [*Bishop Francesco Maria Berti*] has said that Our Lady will do great things through one of our friars," he told at least one prospect. "She will renew the religious spirit in many more hearts in our Order and in other Orders. And much more: She will reawaken the Christian spirit among the faithful of many nations." Father Alberto Arzilli recalls, "I, who by then knew him and believed him a saint, was convinced that this religious, this instrument chosen by Our Lady for such great work had to be Friar Maximilian himself."

On October 16, 1917, Blessed Maximilian and his six founding members quietly met and enrolled themselves as Knights of the Immaculata. The meeting was strikingly similar in many respects to one that took place four hundred years earlier in a small chapel on Montmartre, where Saint Ignatius met with six divinity students and founded the Society of Jesus. But particularly mystical was the fact that this founding meeting of the *Militia Immaculatae* was held three days after the miracle of the sun had occurred at Fatima, where the

Blessed Mother promised the conversion of Russia and the triumph of Her Immaculate Heart. Young Kolbe was unaware of the great miracle at the time. But he himself was to predict late in his life: "One day, you will see the statue of the Immaculata in the center of Moscow atop the Kremlin."

The Militia in Action

Blessed Maximilian humbly left all major decisions of strategy for the Militia to Our Lady, and now patiently awaited the directives She would reveal to him in Her usual inconspicuous way and at Her own good time. Meanwhile, he and his fellow Knights would concentrate on recruiting new members and spreading devotion to the Miraculous Medal. All his life the saint carried a pocketful of the medals—"bullets" he called them. Whenever he went among the public, he seized every opportunity for making a convert. And after giving some soul the challenge of the Faith, he would present the person with a Miraculous Medal, leaving it to Our Lady to finish the job.

Penance was another powerful weapon for the Crusade, and Blessed Maximilian utilized it expertly. Shortly after he came to Rome he began to suffer terrible headaches constantly. He also contracted tuberculosis. The doctors failed to diagnose the consuming disease and consequently his lungs continued to deteriorate, especially after his return to Poland in 1919, where the climate was menacing to such a condition. But the spiritual

warrior never complained, and rarely allowed any sign of his intense suffering to betray him. "It is understood that whoever works for the Immaculate Virgin must be ready to suffer much," he would say. Few if any knew he was chronically ill. Some even ignorantly belittled him for his deliberate slowness of movement, which was necessary to avoid hemorrhaging.

The health of our saint worsened so drastically that late in 1919 he had to enter a sanatorium, where he remained for two years. This was a heavy cross for the relentless apostle, because his superiors ordered him to suspend all his activities in the Militia during that period. Since Maximilian himself was the heart and soul of the Crusade, he knew this could well mean its finish. Yet he complied in absolute obedience.

Obedience, in fact, was his most heroic virtue. He wrote: "How does God reveal His will? Through His representatives on earth. . . . There is only one exception, and that is when a superior commands one to do what clearly, *evidentur*, without a doubt, would be sinful, even in the smallest degree. . . . For then the superior would not be a representative of God; and we are not subjects of any man."

And so Father Kolbe had to trust Our Lady to govern the Militia in his absence. But even if not the leading Knight of the Immaculata for the present, he still remained a priest, and therefore continued to perform the duties of that office as best he was able. He converted a

*Blessed Maximilian later preferred the phrase "especially enemies of the Church," so as to include Communists and all other groups besides Masons who sought her ruin.

number of patients at the sanatorium, and brought many others back to the sacraments—always using his little “bullets,” Miraculous Medals.

In May of 1920, the bedridden priest wrote to the members of the *Militia Immaculatae* at Rome, suggesting, “It would be worthwhile to have some type of publication to serve as an official organ of the M. I. By means of it we could counteract the antireligious tendencies which plague certain countries.” Actually Father Kolbe was aware that antireligious activities plagued all the major nations, as he made clear a year earlier in a stinging lecture concerning the conspiratorial control of the world’s news media, pointing to its vile assaults against the Faith and society.

In his absence Maximilian’s suggestion to publish an official organ went without being acted upon. And in the meantime he saw its need with more and more urgency. When his health had improved sufficiently for him to resume work, he sought permission to undertake this publishing venture himself. His superiors agreed to it, provided he find his own means of financing the work. And so the gentle Franciscan became a beggar, timidly knocking at doors to ask for alms.

In January of 1922 the *Militia’s* first monthly periodical, the *Knight of the Immaculate Mother*, made its appearance. Tremendously rising printing expenses, however, soon led Maximilian Maria Kolbe in search of his own printing press. And with help from an American

priest he was able to buy a small, antiquated, and barely-operable machine, thus setting his crusade on a new course that would lead his work to world fame.

The First Marytown

Nothing succeeds like success, as the saying goes. Within five years, Father Kolbe built up the circulation of the *Knight* to 70,000 subscribers, amazing all his skeptical associates who predicted the publishing operation would fail completely. Consequently, interest in his Crusade increased so greatly that total membership in the *Militia* rose to 126,000 by 1927.

The modest friary at Grodno, where Maximilian carried on his apostolate during these five years, was no longer adequate. Franciscan postulants, eager to dedicate their lives to so worthy an undertaking, and to do so under the direction of so holy a superior, were coming to Grodno in growing numbers. Nor would the friary accommodate the needed expansion of machinery. But unfortunately Father Kolbe’s superiors would not permit him to buy more land.

There is no stopping a crusader, however, when the Queen of Heaven is on his side. Mary provided the solution by sending an angel, one by the name of Prince Drucki-Lubecki, who presented as a gift to the *Militia* a sizable piece of his estate near Warsaw. With lumber and other building materials that also had been donated, the religious brothers soon erected simple barracks on the site, and on the Feast



Father Maximilian (front row, fourth from left) at Grodno.

of Our Lady’s Presentation, November 21, 1927, the printing plant was moved from Grodno. Two weeks later, on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, the new home for the *Militia* was blessed and given the name Niepokalanow—“Marytown.”

Niepokalanow was to become truly a Marian citadel. “For us it is not merely enough to defend the Faith,” wrote the Blessed in 1929. “We have the fortress and, full of trust in our Leader, we go among the enemy hunting hearts to conquer for the Immaculata. . . . Every heart that beats or will beat on earth until the end of time must become the Immaculata’s prize. *This* is our aim. And this as soon as possible.”

Through the genius of Father

Kolbe, Niepokalanow grew into a miracle of human achievement, a modern marvel never before seen in the world. It evolved to become a city unto itself almost fully self-sufficient for its own needs. Over 750 religious comprised its vibrant community, making it the largest friary in the world. And these were fed, clothed, housed, and even medically treated by means of the city’s own facilities.

The principal industry of Niepokalanow, of course, was publishing. At the height of its development ten separate periodicals were being produced, here with a combined readership of one and a half million subscribers. The most modern technology and equipment was used, including devices that were invented by the friars themselves.