

Yesterday, we celebrated the feast of Saint Maximilian Kolbe, who is most known for his heroism in Auschwitz, when he laid down his life to save the life of a man who had been selected for execution due to an escaped prisoner, later found drowned on prison grounds. But what led this man to not only die, but to go into battle many times prior to that against a seemingly incredible force in the Nazis was the knowledge of the love of our Blessed Mother, as he formed a “Blue Army” as he called it, that was spiritually far more powerful than the army of Hitler.

He was born the second son of a poor weaver born on January 8 1894 and was given the baptismal name of Raymond. Both parents were devout Christians with a particular devotion to Mary. In his childhood, he had an experience with Mary where he was discerning his future. He says:

'That night I asked the Mother of God what was to become of me. Then she came to me holding two crowns, one white, the other red. She asked if I was willing to accept either of these crowns. The white one meant that I should persevere in purity, and the red that I should become a martyr. I said that I would accept them both.'

In 1907 Raymond (his birth name) and his elder brother entered a junior Franciscan seminary. He initially thought of becoming a soldier, but decided to follow a call to priesthood. He was ordained in Rome on 28 April 1918.

The love of fighting didn't leave him, but while he was in Rome he stopped seeing the struggle as a military one in terms of earthly armies and weapons. He didn't like what he saw of the world, in fact he saw it as downright evil. The fight, he decided, was a spiritual one. The world was bigger than Poland and there were worse slaveries than earthly ones. The fight was still on, but he would not be waging it with the sword.

And so, on October 16, 1917, with six companions, he founded the Crusade of Mary Immaculate, to help educate people about the Catholic faith and evangelize the world through the intercession of Mary.

He went back to an independent Poland. His own health had already begun to deteriorate, but he was spurred on by Mary. He regarded himself as no more than an instrument of her will, and the only time he was known to lose his temper was in defense of her honor. It was for her that he strove to

develop all the good that was in him, and he wanted to encourage others to do the same.

When Maximilian returned to Poland in 1919 he rejoiced to see his country free once again, but he also saw people needed to be spiritually free.

It was here his crusade began to grow. In January 1922 he began to publish a monthly review, the *Knight of the Immaculate*, in Cracow. Its aim was 'to illuminate the truth and show the true way to happiness'. Funds were scarce at first and only a few thousand copies were made, but then it reached the incredible circulation figure of 750,000 per month, and a second one publication was added added too. He then on December 8, 1938 had a radio station installed at Niepokalanow, a friary he started, with the signature tune (played by the brothers' own orchestra) of the Lourdes hymn. Vocations also increased across Poland with his friary flourishing. But people's hearts changed too. Priests in parishes all over the country reported a tremendous upsurge of faith, which they attributed to the literature emerging from Fr. Kolbe's friary. A campaign against abortion in the columns of the Knight (1938) seemed to awaken the conscience of the nation: more than a million people of all classes and professions ranged

themselves behind the standard of Mary Immaculate. Years later, after the war, the Polish bishops sent an official letter to the Holy See claiming that Fr Kolbe's magazine had prepared the Polish nation to endure and survive the horrors of the war that was soon to follow.

Fr Maximilian was a restless spirit, and his activities could not be confined to Poland. He wanted to go elsewhere to evangelize. When asked whether he had money to finance it, he replied: 'Money? It will turn up somehow or other. Mary will see to it. It's her business and her Son's.'

On 26 February 1930 Fr Maximilian left Poland with four brothers and went to Japan where he went to evangelize. Despite tough travel, in Japan working with a bishop he set up a monastery at Nagasaki which survived the nuclear blast protected by a mountain.

In 1936 he was recalled to Poland and within a few years his friary had been occupied by the invading Germans and most of its inhabitants had been deported to Germany. Among them was Fr Maximilian. But that exile did not last long and on December 8th, the prisoners were set free. From the moment that he returned to Poland Fr Maximilian was galvanized into a

new kind of activity. He began to organize a shelter for 3,000 Polish refugees, among whom were 2,000 Jews. 'We must do everything in our power to help these unfortunate people who have been driven from their homes and deprived of even the most basic necessities. Our mission is among them in the days that lie ahead.' he said. The friars shared everything they had with the refugees. They housed, fed and clothed them, and brought all their machinery into use in their service.

Inevitably the community came under suspicion and was closely watched. Early in 1941, in the only edition of *The Knight of the Immaculate* which he was allowed to publish, Fr Maximilian set pen to paper and thus provoked his own arrest. *'No one in the world can change Truth', he wrote. 'What we can do and should do is to seek truth and to serve it when we have found it. The real conflict is an inner conflict. Beyond armies of occupation and the hecatombs of extermination camps, there are two irreconcilable enemies in the depth of every soul: good and evil, sin and love. And what use are the victories on the battlefield if we ourselves are defeated in our innermost personal selves?'*

On 17 February 1941 he was arrested and sent to the infamous Pawiak prison in Warsaw. Here he was singled out for special ill-treatment. An S.S. guard, seeing him in his habit girdled with a rosary, asked if he believed in Christ. When the priest calmly replied 'I do', the guard struck him. The S. S. man repeated his question several times and receiving always the same answer went on beating him mercilessly. Shortly afterwards the Franciscan habit was taken away and a prisoner's garment was substituted.

On 28 May Fr Maximilian was with over 300 others who were deported to Auschwitz. He was put to work immediately carrying blocks of stone for the construction of a crematorium wall. A commander forced the priests to cut and carry huge tree-trunks. The work went on all day without a stop and had to be done running—with the aid of vicious blows from the guards. Despite his one lung, Father Maximilian accepted the work and the blows with surprising calm. His guard had a relentless hatred against the him and gave him heavier tasks than the others. Sometimes his colleagues would try to come to his aid but he would not expose them to danger. Always he replied, 'Mary gives me strength. All will be well.' At this time he wrote to his mother, 'Do not worry about me or my health, for the good Lord is everywhere and holds every one of us in his great love.'

One day his guard found some of the heaviest planks he could lay hold of and personally loaded them on the Fr. Kolbe's back, ordering him to run. When he collapsed, he kicked him in the stomach and face and had his men give him fifty lashes. When the priest lost consciousness the guard threw him in the mud and left him for dead. But his companions managed to smuggle him to the Revier, the camp hospital. Although he was suffering greatly, he secretly heard confessions in the hospital and spoke to the other inmates of the love of God. When food was brought in and everyone struggled to get his place in the queue so as to be sure of a share, Fr Maximilian stood aside, so that frequently there was none left for him. At other times he shared his meagre ration of soup or bread with others. He was once asked whether such this made sense in a place where every man was engaged in a struggle for survival, and he answered: 'Every man has an aim in life. For most men it is to return home to their wives and families, or to their mothers. For my part, I give my life for the good of all men.'

In his last act there, it was found during the count it was found that three prisoners had escaped: the deputy commander of Auschwitz, Karl Fritzch, announced that on account of the escape of the three prisoners, ten

prisoners would be picked in reprisal from the blocks in which the fugitives had lived and would be assigned to the Bunker (the underground starvation cell).' Fr. Kolbe walked up to him, and pointed at a non-commissioned officer, Franciszek Gajowniczek, who had been a Polish army sergeant, sent to Auschwitz while crossing the border into Slovakia. When the sentence of doom had been pronounced, he had cried out in despair, 'O my poor wife, my poor children. I shall never see them again.' Fr Kolbe insisted on taking his place. He went to the starvation bunker, and kept hope alive for the other 9. At every inspection, when almost all the others were lying on the floor, dying, Fr Kolbe was seen kneeling or standing in the center as he looked cheerfully in the face of the S. S. men. Two weeks passed in this way. Meanwhile one after another they died, until only Fr Kolbe was left. This the authorities felt was too long; the cell was needed for new victims. He was given a lethal injection. A witness found Fr Kolbe leaning in a sitting position against the back wall with his eyes open and his head drooping sideways. His face was calm and radiant.

The heroism of Father Kolbe went echoing through Auschwitz. It was later said that Fr Kolbe's death was 'a shock filled with hope, bringing new life

and strength.... It was like a powerful shaft of light in the darkness of the camp.'

His reputation spread far and wide, through the Nazi camps and beyond. After the war newspapers all over the world were deluged with articles about this 'saint for our times', 'saint of progress', 'giant of holiness'. On 17 October 1971 Maximilian Kolbe was beatified and canonized in 1982.

Though he died 70 years ago today, I think his story is more timely than ever. We do not face concentration camps and mass extermination of people in Europe today and the world is not at war on a global scale. But there is on the one hand so much darkness when I look at the world today. I am greatly troubled by a number of things going on. I'm troubled that unborn children are seen as expendable and their lives can be ended. I'm troubled by censorship and the power of many governments in the world; of things that we hold as Catholics that could be deemed "too hateful" such as how we do not change God's definition of marriage as between man and woman. I'm troubled by the response of many governments and politicians too with respect to Covid, and the line between health and safety and tyranny being crossed with churches closed up. I'm troubled also by

censorship on that issue too by big tech when even doctors are silenced for having a different opinion. I'm troubled by indifferentism and apathy among so many in the world who don't seem to care about these issues. Some say "how could the Holocaust have happened" and it was largely do to apathy and people not recognizing what was happening as Nazis came to power, much like 20 years before them the Communists came to power in Russia and killed the Czar. I'm troubled by people drifting from the Church and not seeing God as important in their lives. I'm troubled by a sensualism and the objectification of the human body and what it does to people especially kids. I'm troubled by how Muslims are persecuted in China along with Catholics. I'm troubled by how law enforcement get vilified and thrown under the bus in our own country. I'm troubled by a culture that becomes increasingly intolerant and is quick to cancel and censor and yell rather than listen and talk to the other side and try to find common ground. Yes, there's a lot that troubles me when I look at how the world is.

The thing of it is though is I do not despair. I look at what is wrong with the world, and I also see response of God. And a reminder I must respond too.

The Ark of the Covenant I'd say many of us associate with Indiana Jones and Raiders of the Lost Ark. In the movie, the Nazis try to find it because they believe it will give them power; but of course at the end of the movie God's justice prevails. A fictional movie of course, but the real Ark was a tabernacle holding the remains of the Ten Commandments and the Staff of Aaron. The ancient Israelites would bring it into battle; David when he finds it brings it back to Jerusalem and dances as we hear in that first reading celebrating God is here. But a more perfect representation of God being here is in Mary who is the Ark of the Covenant. She brings God into this world; it's why John the Baptist, unborn, dances too, leaping in the womb of Elizabeth.

In Jesus, we of course have Emmanuel, God is with us. We the people who have walked in darkness see a great light; the light of God and His love. The reading from Revelation reminds us that God comes to be here with us and with our struggle. The dragon tries to destroy the child with chaos and water but the earth created by God swallows up the water and the woman makes it to safety. The woman, who we see as Mary, is in safety, but she does not just stay far away. Rather she is still involved in our world. We know the story of miracles and of her appearances, but there is also her

role in inspiring people like Maximilian Kolbe who are her warriors.

Maximilian is a man of hope; a virtue that does not mean I'm waiting to go to heaven and being idle, but a virtue where a person wanting to go to heaven wants to bring heaven into this world and make it a better place. Through hope, we trust that God's promises will be fulfilled and we desire heaven, and it leads to charity or love which is what Maximilian Kolbe did his entire life.

How then do we as Catholics be that agent of hope? For like Mary visiting Elizabeth bringing her joy and Jesus bringing John the Baptist joy, we are called to be people of hope. We need to re-awaken the world as Saint Maximilian re-awakened Poland. We need to stand firm in the face of evil. I think there's a few things we can do so we reflect what Mary has done for us.

It starts with that trust in God. A month from now we will celebrate the Feast of Our Lady of Sorrows; where our Blessed Mother is at the foot of the cross and with her Son to the end. Yes there's a lot of ugliness in the world. But we trust God has not abandoned this world but is with us and will never leave us alone and see us through.

We then look at our families. We strive to evangelize our children. So many kids have a vague understanding of God, but don't know who God is because mom and dad never pray as a family, don't talk much religion, or God is one among many things. It all starts at home, with parents not being afraid to talk about the faith with their kids, setting a good example for them through how they work and love them, and taking them to Mass so they can encounter God.

With ourselves, we strive to grow in holiness by learning from our mistakes. By knowing with joy when we come to receive Jesus in the Eucharist He is with us to help us grow and become stronger. But we also receive that food for the journey. Mary's journey was tough. Certainly traveling as an expectant mom would have been tough in visiting Elizabeth, but her life was trusting that it would work out from the moment the angel visits her. Yet she never backs down. And neither can we. We need to be that people of hope, and not give up on this world or people we know who have fallen away. We can't give up when our kids get older and lose interest in religion. We can't give up when some in society want to shut us up because we go against the prevailing majority opinion on an issue, especially on faith and

morals. We can't just look at the world and say "that's the way it is" and retreat from it. Rather we have to be engaged in it. We might not change everything, but we can win souls for heaven if only we do not give up.

Admittedly, there's a lot to be nervous about in our world today. But we as Catholics cannot look back, because there was never some golden era where things were perfect. Mary invites us to look ahead, and Mary is with us. Maximilian died in a place of horror and a place where hope was seemingly gone. But instead he inspired millions, brought millions of souls to Jesus, and set a fire in so many that was far greater than anything the Nazis could do. May we do the same knowing that Mary intercedes for us, but we, like her, must be the arks of the covenant - proclaiming Jesus to the world, but also through our words and actions, teaching the world what it means to believe in God and what His love offers them.