

Beyond the Centenary! Let Us Work for the M.I. of the Future

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Introduction

The M.I. has just experienced the celebrations of the Centenary of its foundation. The gatherings in Rome were truly significant, full of insights for the growth of our Association. As you know, an international commission of members of the M.I. worked during the Centenary celebrations on planning for the future of the M.I., setting guidelines for its next steps. I joyfully present you with a document that I have written based upon the suggestions of our dear M.I. sisters and brothers who offered their own contributions regarding a “read” of this moment in our movement’s history, which lead to indications for shaping its future. This is the background of this present document, which can correctly be defined as a planning document. I happily offer it for consideration by the worldwide M.I. in order that our path forward might be one of even greater energy and conviction after the commemoration of our Centenary.

1. The Charism of the M.I. Today

The goal of the Militia of Mary Immaculate is the conversion and sanctification of every person by means of the intercession of Mary Immaculate and the faithful and creative commitment of M.I. members. Conversion must begin with work on ourselves, because we first need to change our own modes of thinking. It requires faithfulness to the Kolbean charism, a dynamic faithfulness which reflects contemporary reality, and not merely copies the past. In our own conversion we look to Mary, our model of continuing spiritual growth, in our liberating of self from a worldly spirit and in nurturing humility and a sense of service. Every M.I. member is called to become a gift for every brother or sister, knowing that Jesus has given us the great gift of Mary! With her in our hearts, we are charitable toward every sister and brother.

Regarding personal conversion, it is useful to remind ourselves of St. Maximilian’s words: “We must obviously be on guard, because our self-love, our “I”, will rise up against us more than once. Various troubles, temptations, and adversities may at times nearly overwhelm us. But if our roots sink deeper and deeper into the ground and humility takes root more deeply in us, so that we rely on ourselves less and less, then the Immaculata will ensure that everything is only an increase of merit to us. Yet, trials are necessary, and they will certainly come, because the gold of love must be purified in the fire of afflictions [see *Eccl 2:5; 1Pt 1:7*]. In fact, suffering is the very nourishment that strengthens love” (*Kolbe Writings*, 755). We are called to continuing conversion, to a constant interior rebirth which allows us first to evangelize ourselves and then the people we meet. This

aspect of the Kolbean charism has no expiration and is always valid. Whoever journeys in faith in the M.I is called to look within and quickly to get to work on his or her own heart, in order to be open always to accept the new life offered by the Lord, exactly as Mary had done.

This famous quotation from St. Maximilian is still quite true and applicable: “The Immaculata: here is our ideal. To approach her, become like her, permit her to take possession of our heart and all our self, that she may live and act in and through us, that she may love God with our heart, that we may belong to her without any restriction: this is our ideal.

“To radiate in the surroundings, conquer souls for her in a way that, before her, the hearts of our neighbors may be opened so that she may extend her dominion in the hearts of all those who live in any corner of the earth, without regard for racial, national, linguistic differences, and similarly in the hearts of all those who will live in any moment of history till the end of the world: this is our ideal. Besides, may her life be ever more rooted in us from day to day, from one hour to another, from one moment to another, and this without any limitation: this is our ideal. Again, may her life develop in the same way in every soul that exists and will exist in any time: this is our cherished ideal” (*Kolbe Writings*, 1210).

Even today the Immaculata remains our ideal. Consecrating ourselves to her has important repercussions in our own path of conversion and discipleship, as well as in the pathway of mission which is renewed thanks to our constant listening to the voice of the Spirit exactly as she did. St. Maximilian shows that the charism that he began is always renewable and can always be put into practice when each M.I member welcomes the divine movement in his or her heart.

The first field of missionary work in the thought and witness of St. Maximilian is precisely one’s own heart. This involves **evangelizing one’s self**, of consistently working on one’s personal characteristics to allow a crystal-clear love for the Lord and for all brothers and sisters to prevail in one’s own actions and in one’s own heart. It is the commitment to vanquish the great enemies of egotism, pride and arrogance which foul up the intentions and motivations of the faithful. Religious men and women and believers in general are called to undertake this difficult and delicate battle, for it is an expression of one’s own love for the Almighty and of one’s own desire for greater spiritual progress. In his writings and example Kolbe clearly indicates the need for the virtue of humility to prevail above all else. Humility allows the correct perception of one’s self before God and others, and allows one to see the dependence of all one’s strengths exclusively upon the loving and providential presence of God mediated in a wondrous way by the Mother of God. It is necessary, therefore, to keep constant guard over one’s heart, so to be able to daily purge it of anything that hinders it from perfect giving. In this way it is constantly conquered by the love of God, of which the Immaculata is a marvelous expression.

The M.I. is called to attentive discernment in a perfectly Kolbean style. The Polish martyr teaches us **to pay great attention to the social context in which we live**, in order to find the correct missionary methods to employ. In his time, the Saint zeroed in on Freemasonry and totalitarianism as the elements which were dangerously altering people's religious sensibilities. Our Association is called upon to ask ourselves: What might be the critical situations present in our society, so that we might offer an apostolic action that brings peace and spiritual support? Today such realities as consumerism, individualism, indifference or marginalization cannot leave us apathetic.

These and other plagues have been well studied so that we might understand how to confront them in a Christian manner. For example, the M.I. could certainly do more to support those excluded from society, or to dialogue more with migrants. There is certainly much more to say regarding these topics. Our movement cannot and ought not to fortify its castle on past positions, but must try to evolve its own capability to speak to people of today.

Never forget **communion!** In this current year 2018 this is the goal for reflection by the entire Kolbean family. In order that St. Maximilian's charism might be lived and transmitted as best as possible, it is imperative that we act as one family. Notwithstanding our own differences and uniqueness, we can go forward together in full communion. Only in this way will our message be deemed credible.

2. The Mission of the M.I. Today

The M.I. today is called to relive the fervor of St. Maximilian in his work for the conversion of all men and women—an ambitious goal. We recall and put into practice in our own mission the passion for conquering souls shown by Father Kolbe. This whole process occurs gradually, step by step, paying attention to each specific person we encounter. M.I. members are called to be instruments of the Immaculata to such a point that they become like Mary. Relevant in this context is the spirit of **welcoming the other**, a nonjudgmental welcome full of tenderness. People are welcomed independently of their own personal history (cf. *Kolbe Writings*, 1175). M.I. members give witness by life in the world wherein they express a Christian outlook. In fulfilling our mission we must do everything with love and for love since “only love creates” (cf. *Kolbe Writings*, 1205). Besides, “when the fire of love is ablaze, it cannot be constrained within the heart, but blazes forth and burns, consumes, and absorbs other hearts” (*Kolbe Writings*, 1325). The fire which the Holy Spirit has ignited in our hearts in order to exhort all Christians to reignite the fire of love for God must be safeguarded. How?

- By means of insistent, continuous, constant **prayer**, by means of daily sacrifices, offering our ordinary everyday-ness to God;
- Through Kolbe's impulse, that is, by cultivating within ourselves his **interior drive for mission**;
- By **going outside** the group, entering the world, and sharing this flame.

We must continually live our mission “outside” in order to respond and provide some support to the poverties of the world on the outskirts of human existence. The M.I. member does not have to provide answers, but become an answer with one's very life. We must depart like Mary in order to bring Jesus. A renewed zeal for mission stimulates the faith and the passion of an M.I. member by awaking and enflaming the hearts of people he or she encounters. These expressions of St. Maximilian are very significant: “With regard to the program of activities, previous experience has taught me not to be limited by too many rules and regulations, but to make room for more spontaneity in projects and proposals. Above all, conformity to the will of the Immaculata is the secret of success. Prayer then, humble, trusting and loving prayer, gives light to the intellect and gives strength to the will. The Immaculata herself removes the obstacles. [...] the members of the Militia, on the other hand, are to be the soul of everything, but on the outside it is better that they be seen *as little as possible*. It is better that they be not known by anybody. This way they can insert themselves in many places where entrance would be completely denied if they were in the open” (*Kolbe Writings*, 92). The M.I. member must be present in **all dimensions of society**. M.I. members must **go outside their own ways of acting**.

We are called to offer our Christ-centered message to humanity and to communicate untiringly to all, and above all by our own witness, the love of Jesus for every person and the importance of the presence of the Immaculata in each person's life. Unceasing work for the Immaculata is a fundamental characteristic for whoever embarks upon a journey of faith within the M.I. as taught us by St. Maximilian: “So, our task here is very simple: working hard all day, working ourselves to death, being considered a little less than a fool by our own people and, exhausted, dying for the Immaculata. And, since we do not live on this earth twice, but only once, we must do our utmost in all the areas I just mentioned, with great diligence, to give proof of our love for the Immaculata” (*Kolbe Writings*, 301).

Each member of the M.I. is to cultivate maximum docility to the promptings of the Spirit. **There are no “typical” types of apostolates** for our movement. Father Kolbe teaches us to listen to what the Paraclete suggests in order to renew our mission. The Saint was quite versatile in his own pastoral endeavors. He worked in formation, in printing, in radio, in helping the marginalized,

and as an apostle in a concentration camp. He did not close himself off in what had already been done; he allowed himself to be led by the breath of the Spirit, imitating the Immaculata who teaches us to be open to divine plans. It is urgent that we work in the same way, in order to focus a mission in line with the will of God and with the needs of people around us.

We are to make best use of **all our talents and all our creativity** in order to be sharp in our apostolic efforts. Each of us is rich in spiritual gifts to place at the service of the Church and of others. The leaders of the movement must be supremely attentive to value the characteristics of each individual member, just as St. Maximilian did for the particular gifts of each of his co-workers. It is also by means of the gifts that each person carries in his or her heart that we can long for a mission always-new. Each member of the M.I. ought to perceive his or her self as a unique gift for the entire Association.

Never lack **courage**. Just like St. Maximilian, we operate by entrusting ourselves to the Immaculata without fear and by fully abandoning ourselves to God, with the certainty that each one of our activities will be provided for by the Immaculata. Just like the Polish saint, we always act in the certainty that nothing is beyond us and that even the most innovative works are practical and possible.

3. Concrete Proposals for the Future

Mission continues to be the future of the M.I., as I had already noted during the Centenary observances: “A fundamental aspect of the life of the MI is mission. Missionary thrust has always been a specific feature of this Movement and represents both its past and its future. Mission has been and still is a priority in the journey of the Kolbean association. In keeping with Kolbe’s style, it is important, therefore, to look back at the past one hundred years and to look to the future from this missionary stance.

Apostolic work cannot be limited by space and time. It has to be carried out everywhere and with the largest participation of people who share in the same ideal and evangelizing goal. The whole world is mission territory; therefore, the best theological and cultural formation is necessary to ensure the best reception of the Gospel message. The missionary is a person who thinks and works on a grand scale, supported by divine grace. Saint Maximilian dreamt “big” and therefore the MI and all his apostolic initiatives were born with a wide goal and a universal dimension.” (R. DI MURO, *One Hundred Years of Mission: A Year for Reflecting and Re-launching with Confidence and Vigor* <http://www.mi-international.org/en/centenario.html>).

A prospective of the M.I. of today is the need to both value and practice the charism of St. Maximilian. Our saint has left an indelible mark in the Franciscan world and in the Church. His

message and his witness must be rediscovered based upon the needs of people and the Church community of today. St. Maximilian's mission and martyrdom hold a great fascination even today; it is important that the movement which he founded rediscover the elements which support his theological structure. Planning in this way allows them to be introduced into current realities.

The M.I. is always called to discover its own **missionary vocation**. The mission for which it was begun is still valid today: to bring the light of Christ and the precious presence of the Immaculata to people. People still need to be enlightened by the Christian message and to know the maternal love of the Blessed Virgin. The Association has been called to this, an evangelization that employs whatever means possible to reach hearts, and, as Pope Francis would say, even at the fringes of the world.

In fact, "A Church which 'goes forth' is a Church whose doors are open. Going out to others in order to reach the fringes of humanity does not mean rushing out aimlessly into the world. Often it is better to simply slow down, to put aside our eagerness in order to see and listen to others, to stop rushing from one thing to another and to remain with someone who has faltered along the way" (POPE FRANCIS, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 46). Pope Francis' words are a superb stimulus to seek out those who are oppressed on the fringes of the world, and to offer them relief by word and deed. In any case this is the style taught by Kolbe: always attentively notice people who are suffering in body or in spirit, and actively offer something useful for their well-being. The Holy Father's invitation must become a great stimulus for the entire Association of today.

The M.I. is called to continue along the path of developing the laity. The laity play an important role today, but in the future will be called upon to give even more for the fulfillment of the mission entrusted to them. They will foster further development of internationalization in those places where Kolbe's confreres are not present and where religious men and women cannot enter. **Young people** are very sensitive to the story of the Polish martyr. For this reason always give the greatest consideration to their gifts and never stifle their creativity. Activities with young people, already on the increase, should to be fostered all the more. The M.I. believes a lot in its young people and knows that they can contribute a new impulse to its foundation.

Additionally, M.I. members throughout the world are reminded not to forget the importance of increased **use of technology**, including the most sophisticated, in proclaiming and witnessing to the Gospel. These are major challenges that must be addressed with **the determination of Maximilian**.

This all becomes possible through a greater visibility of the M.I. in the world, an indicator of attention to people's distresses which will be met by effective and decisive missionary action "on all fronts" according to St. Maximilian's style. In this context the relationship between the

Association and the Friars Minor Conventual is of fundamental importance in order that the Kolbean charism be spread and diffused. Formation for mission, arranged and fostered by the International Center, will be necessary for unity in the movement. The movement must perceive itself as one great family in mission throughout the world, which commits itself to safeguard those Christian values embraced by the Church. Missionary action is never standardized, cookie-cutter style: it is always renewed and made useful for the spiritual growth of all our brothers and sisters.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I invite everyone, above all, to continue to contribute in their own way in order that contemporary humanity, imprisoned within a worldly mentality, may be converted and opened to meet the Lord who offers mercy. This will happen beginning with the *metànoia* of our own hearts, which, as St. Maximilian Kolbe stated, is the first mission field. May the joy of living the Gospel and of following the Lord with the faithfulness and boldness of the Immaculata be seen in all of our deeds.

May we never tire of committed and determined evangelization wherever we live. As St. Maximilian suggests, we carry the love of Christ and the tenderness of Mary everywhere. He himself was an apostle of a mission without limits, by which he fearlessly sought to bring the Gospel message everywhere, marvelously witnessing to it even at Auschwitz. Let us continue to give our utmost in order to propose in every place and by every means the new life offered by Christ

Let us cultivate a welcoming style like St. Maximilian's, who welcomed everyone with an open heart. Even in a death camp he was able to encourage people of every background and upbringing, to the point of giving up his life for the father of a family. His is an extremely enlightening example for modern humanity.

We are called in Kolbe's footsteps not to close ourselves off in some sterile individualism, but really to encounter our sisters and brothers: to understand their fatigue, needs, and sufferings; to offer them our whole support by concretely working with them; by perhaps bringing them some joy and relief.

We belong to the Immaculata because we have entrusted and consecrated ourselves to her: we are open to her example of charity in journeying to Elizabeth and in caring about the wedding feast at Cana. Our charism is really very rich. Let us put it into practice and value it, as the Spirit suggests. Let us learn a real and effective mission style from her, one always open to the will of God.

Let us live the Kolbean motto "Love alone creates" with conviction and trust. Let us sow the seeds of charity and kindness everywhere, and thereby help the human race to be freed from the

sting of hatred and war, so that the love of Christ might always triumph in every heart and in every place.

I would like to close this letter with an exhortation from St. John Paul II that I would wish becomes our own: “Be strong in faith and live with enthusiasm the commitments of the Militia of Mary Immaculate, to which you belong, following the teaching and examples of Father Maximilian Kolbe. “To suffer, work, love and rejoice”: this was his program and the summary of his life. May it be so also for you, with the help of the Blessed Virgin. And may my blessing, which I impart with great affection to you and to all the members of your Militia always accompany you.” (JOHN PAUL II, *Address to Members of the “Militia of Mary Immaculate,”* Oct. 18, 1981, 4).