



Father Maximilian

A TWICE-CROWNED KNIGHT

FATHER MAXIMILIAN KOLBE
Friar Minor Conventual

by MARIA WINOWSKA
TRANSLATED BY THERESE PLUMEREAU

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Feast of the Miraculous Medal

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Dedicated to the Immaculata;
to St. Maximilian Kolbe;
and in memory of
our generous benefactor,
Joseph, a Knight of the Immaculata;
and Petty Officer Michael Anthony Monsoor
(who died saving the lives of others).

*May their souls and all the souls
of the faithful departed,
through the mercy of God,
rest in peace. Amen.*

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Preface

We are children of our time, and our times are apocalyptic. The goal of life is materialism; its rule is the cult of man, who worships himself in a virtual world, where one can find any distraction, any possible and even impossible pleasure, anything but reality. In such a world the highest, most everlasting and only true reality has no place: God and the relationship to him are relegated to a feeling, to an option where everybody can choose what he wants. But man is looking for an ideal. He wants to be happy, and he is given a mass of idols, stars—for the most part morally corrupt people, whose goals are ambition, riches, vanity, glittering beauty...Babylon.

We live in this world, and we are asked to be not of this world. How hard for a Catholic, especially for a young Catholic, to resist such an atmosphere. Theoretically he knows the Truth; he knows that life is a fight on earth to avoid Hell and win Heaven. But the brutal reality makes this deep conviction somewhat unrealistic, abstract. The most touching mysteries of our Faith risk becoming an empty ceremony, and whatever was the most important to our fathers' Christian life, such as devotion to Our Lady, is often superficial routine. The life of the Christian comes close to schizophrenia: a double life. On the one hand, Sunday High Mass and some prayers during the day; on the other, a struggle to live and behave for the rest of the week largely as everybody else. We feel unwell, but what can we do?

Suddenly a man comes before our eyes, whose whole life, humanly speaking, is that of a fool: from his Polish home he receives an immense love towards Mary; he grows up with the idea of serving her totally, of being her servant, her property, her soldier, her knight. As a young friar, he experiences the consequences of World War I and must be an eyewitness to one of the greatest triumphs of the Church's worst enemy—the 200th anniversary celebration of Freemasonry in Rome before the gates of Saint Peter. While the hierarchs mourn, for him it is an occasion to realize his most foolish dream: his desire to know Mary better and more deeply understand that she has the power to crush all enemies and Satan himself. So he founds the Militia of the Immaculate, as an army to vanquish the worst enemies of God in trying to convert them. Truly a fool—one against millions!

Almost immediately after this October of 1917, he falls mortally ill; his friends and confreres often ridicule him as a hopeless dreamer. Poland's tragic situation after the war seems to need a remedy completely different from such foolish attempts "to go to the moon on a bicycle." But our sick man (and he will be very sick until the end of his life), with nothing in his pockets and almost everybody against

him, looks upon Mary with unlimited trust, and day after day he gives her his sufferings, his prayers, all his time and especially his always burning heart. The miracle happens: the fool attracts people, other fools; the army grows; they start a bulletin in the midst of the world economic crisis, and after fifteen years he gathers in his "City of the Immaculate" almost 800 religious friars, with millions of copies of his "Knight of the Immaculate" and millions of knights all over the world. After having built up within six years another "Garden of the Immaculate" in Japan, which became afterwards the greatest mission of the whole country, he will finish his life by offering himself in place of a prisoner condemned to death in the hunger bunker at Auschwitz.

Is Maximilian Kolbe the answer to the question posed above? In a world which goes crazy without God and destroys itself in worshipping man and his false liberty, we have to become fools like him. Not just simply fools, but fools of the IMMACULATA. She is the key to the mystery of his life; she is the motivation for his becoming more and more heroic; she is the reason for his marvelous successes and his final victory. She has the power to change one's life, to make of the most humble, weak and poor sinner a hero of faith, a valiant warrior, a soldier, a knight. With Maximilian Kolbe we discover her, who is the great and last hope of the world, the only guarantee to overcome the enemies of salvation and to reach eternal happiness at last.

Moreover, we discover the great task and sublime vocation of our life on earth: to fight for her, to become her instruments in helping the poor world to escape from darkness, bitterness and eternal sadness. In her light we learn again to appreciate the Truth, and to understand our times as they really are: the final battle between the dragon with his beasts and the "woman clothed with the sun...and on her head a crown of twelve stars." Maximilian Kolbe is a living illustration of what she announced in Fatima the same year that he founded the Militia Immaculatae: the triumph of her Immaculate Heart. We are called to be instruments in her Immaculate Hands. In that way our short life will attain the greatest end, what man by himself can only desire—true, permanent, ever-burning, infinitely happy LOVE.

Fr. Karl Stehlin, Poland
 January 7, 2010
*116th Anniversary of
 St. Maximilian Kolbe's birth*

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An Explanation

I START with a confession. Where did I get the idea to write this book? Why have I written it?

Father Maximilian Kolbe has haunted me ever since a day toward the end of the war when I was lodged at the Abbey of Montserrat in Spain. Like so many others in flight from the secret police, I had been forced to cross the Pyrenees. I found a brief notice of his death in my mail forwarded from Jerusalem. I knew from experience what the concentration camp is—the forced labor, the hunger. I also knew how certain unaccepted sufferings degrade. Death does not improvise itself. Death is the last note of a life's whole theme. So I asked myself the question: "What was the profound life of this religious man that he chose to die in that way?"

I had got little more than a glimpse of him. Frail, his head slightly bent, his looks were not impressive. People had introduced him to me as a powerful man of action, enthusiastic, enterprising. I was struck by the penetrating and limpid expression of his eyes. I knew vaguely of *Niepokalanow*, "the City of the Immaculate," which he had built in the wilderness. I confess it: he mystified me; but my academic work could scarcely place me in contact with his publications.

War came. Hunted by the Germans, I was obliged to leave Poland secretly. Here again Father Maximilian was following

me into Spain by way of Jerusalem. I began by writing an article in Spanish, published in *Cristiandad* at Barcelona. In France I wrote a brief biographical essay in *La Vie Spirituelle*. Then I thought that Father Maximilian and I would part company. But no! The saint would not relax his grip easily. He kept haunting me—I mean as a subject for a book.

Still I hesitated. It is not easy to make a saint live again, and in a language which is not yours! If only I could write in Polish, using words altogether familiar and easy to manage . . . But the French language in strange hands often balks as does a beautiful pony on the open plain, with moist eyes and snorting nostrils, obeying only his master. I definitely preferred to evade the attempt.

Here is the incident which made me succumb after so many hesitations. Without a conversation with Pierre, who had been imprisoned in the same camp as I—his name is different, but that does not matter—this book would not have been written. Pierre and I met on a Paris boulevard one day in the spring. There was a light rain, and trees were in bloom. Our discussion became a trifle heated, with the result that I had to give up, accept the challenge, and take to writing. Pierre had spent four years in the concentration camp of Dachau. He had come back bitter, aged, unrecognizable; his body sick, his soul still more sick. At each one of our meetings, it was the same story: "I no longer have any faith in man. What a filthy beast he is! What a selfish brute!"

His memories obsessed him. He sipped the bitterness of their horror, scrutinizing one by one the long line of miseries. He would finish by hissing through his teeth the horrible words of Sartre: "Human fellowship is hell!"

To a very direct question, he gave this answer: "Yes, I believe that God exists, in an inaccessible heaven of heavens, while we poor human beings are crawling in mud. Grace? Why, yes, that exists perhaps, but of what importance is it if it does not succeed in changing man? There are certain miseries where grace has no access, where even God conceals His face. If you only knew!"

"Tell me, Pierre," I said to him, "what do you make of the saints?"

He began to laugh, a laugh that hurt. "Why, yes, I believe in saints. I believe that there are saints. But they are products of greenhouses. They need a special climate, a favorable one with sanctifying conditions. Saints do not grow in inhuman soil. I defy you to show me a saint in a concentration camp. One saint. One who truly prefers his neighbor to himself. I defy you!"

For a moment I kept silent. Then, "Pierre, suppose I accept the challenge? If I show you a saint in a real concentration camp; someone who offered to die in place of a fellow prisoner . . ."

He looked at me with his pitiful beaten-dog eyes. We were standing in a doorway, while the rain fell hard and the brisk steps of infrequent passers-by alternated with the gusts of rain.

"Then, and only then, will I admit that you are right."

We changed the subject, but the blow had reached its mark. From this broken conversation the scheme of this book originated. It is not intended especially for religious persons, neither for the convents nor for the ladies of charitable societies. I destine and dedicate it to my brother the con-

demned one, to all those who have lost faith in man and, through that loss, no longer believe in God!

Every man is an image of the living God, but only the saint appraises it, as a jeweler appraises a pearl. We have the terrible power to spit into the adorable Face, slap It, twist It into a caricature. The saint carries It as in a living monstrosity. And a time can come when the invading Presence flashes like a flame on the bruised body, making sacred wounds blossom. Not every saint bears the stigmata; but there is no saint who does not die on the Cross. Love must be stronger than death. And sanctity is simply an adventure of love, the most thrilling adventure, *and within reach of all*. This is what Father Maximilian Kolbe, whose life I here relate, was incessantly preaching.

A Twice-Crowned Knight.

The Two Crowns

THE parents of Raymond Kolbe were poor people, plain weavers who worked hard in order to live. In Poland at that time, a working day was ten hours long. The salaries were meager and left to the will of the middlemen, who resold with enormous profits the beautiful fabrics manufactured with great care and love in innumerable small workshops. The large industry of Lodz was just coming into existence. The workingman would labor in his home fully under the control of these exploiters. By working together continually for ten hours a day, husband and wife would earn just enough to raise a family.

Jules Kolbe was tall, blond, very gentle, a little taciturn; he did not drink or smoke, and attended church frequently. Through these qualities, he won the heart and hand of his wife Maria, whose maiden name was Dabrowska. From her we get a more accurate picture. She left us several letters written in a high-flown style and with an unskilled hand, but full of touching details.

Maria as a child seemed to have a religious vocation. But at that time—we are in 1875—the Russian occupation had suppressed the convents; the nuns were scattered and did not wear any distinctive garb. Maria did not know any of them

but prayed naïvely that she might die before being obliged to marry. However, it does not appear that when she did marry she felt that she had made a great sacrifice. She chose her future willingly, delighted to see her husband so virtuous—and so docile, because (may the Lord forgive me!) it seems to me that it was she who vigorously conducted all the business of the poor household. Energetic, pious, a little gossipy, a hard worker, very quick at getting out of a fix, she ruled her little world masterfully and could not tolerate disobedience. I find her a little harsh, but grace will smooth out such flaws.

Evidently, with boys—and there were only boys—a firm hand was necessary. Two had died very young; there were three others: Francis, Raymond, the subject of this book (born January 7, 1894), and Joseph, the youngest. Perhaps she was a little too firm. When punishments for mischief were coming to him, Raymond, a very honest lad, would stretch over the bench and hold out the whip to his mother. He accepted peacefully what he deserved and then repeated his mischievous acts again and again. Fortunately, he was a child like others and, according to numerous witnesses, a very winning little boy.

He loved nature and entertained himself by planting little trees. One day, after his ordination, he was to come back to Pabianice to see "his trees." They are still standing. Here is the worst misdeed recorded of him. One day, with his own money he bought an egg and put it under a hen to be hatched. He wanted so much to have a little chick! Unfortunately his mother did not agree with him, and the little Raymond received a sound beating. Had he forgotten to ask

permission? It is most likely that the person who hands this incident down to us forgot to quote the aggravating circumstances, for Raymond was not yet a saint. He was not even a child of an easy temper, if we can believe certain scattered remarks. Lively, very independent, enterprising and stubborn, with a brisk and impulsive nature, he tried the patience of his mother, who one day exclaimed in exasperation, "My poor child, what will become of you?"

Her expression must have been more eloquent than the words she spoke with joined hands and eyes uplifted to heaven, for this reprimand brought on the little one a real crisis of soul. His mother admitted that from that time he changed completely and became very good and very obedient. Surprised at this sudden transformation, she began to watch the lad and noticed that he disappeared more and more often behind the cupboard, where there was a little altar of Our Lady of Czestochowa with an oil-lamp which was lighted every Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday. Crouched in the corner, the child prayed a long time and would come out with his eyes reddened by tears. Very much puzzled, his mother one day subjected him to close questioning.

"Now then, Raymond, what is the matter with you? Why do you cry like a girl?" She thought he was sick.

Raymond hung his head and did not want to answer.

Fortunately, she insisted and broke through to that fierce, shy little soul! She took the most effective way.

"Look here, my little one, you must tell everything to Mother; do not be disobedient!"

"Oh no," Raymond thought, "for nothing in the world would I give up obedience, now that I have seen her."

Crying and trembling, he spoke. "Mother, when you said to me, 'Raymond, what will become of you?' I felt very sad and went to the Blessed Virgin and asked her what would become of me. After that, in church I asked her again. Then the Blessed Virgin appeared to me, holding two crowns; one white and the other red. She looked lovingly at me and asked me which one I would choose. The white one meant that I would always be pure, and the red one that I would die a martyr. Then I answered the Blessed Virgin, 'I choose both of them.' She smiled and disappeared.

"Since then," he added after a moment of silence, "when we go to church, it seems to me that I no longer go with Father and you, but with the Blessed Virgin and Saint Joseph."

Like a good psychologist, his mother explains: "His radical transformation proves that the child was telling the truth. From that day he was not the same. His face aglow, he would often talk to me of martyrdom, his great dream."

Was this a mystical experience such as one meets in the life of guileless children—the kind grown-ups fortunately fail to grasp? Was this high grace and prophetic vision? That is not for us to decide. But above all, let us not lose sight of one fact: this little boy was nothing of a dreamer. Rather, he was precise, concrete, deeply realistic, so passionately interested in modern technical discoveries that he excelled in the sciences.

The crisis of his soul once solved, he was never again to mention the mysterious meeting. For long years, until his death, Raymond guarded the secret jealously. All his life was to be set and illuminated by it, but he confided it to no one.

It took an emphatic order from his mother to make him speak. After that, absolute silence. Only once, shortly before his death, did the secret flow to his lips, but an invincible reserve prevented his telling it. Even then, he reproached himself for having "talked too much." Despite his open-hearted nature, joyful and sincere, he never confided it to anyone. At the age of ten—for he was only ten at the time—his heart was captured forever. She was there. She was enough. His Confidant, his Queen, and his Lady.

The Great Departure

A Providential Pharmacist

RAYMOND meanwhile grew like the little trees he planted. All the testimonies we have been able to gather attest to the fact that he was charming. Since the great crisis of his soul, he had become perfectly well-behaved and made visible effort to get rid of his petty childhood defects. He was also very intelligent, but no one knew that yet.

Like so many poor people, his parents had not the means to pay for his education. They taught the children how to read and write from the little they knew themselves. Finally, by great effort they sent Francis, the oldest boy and the favorite, to the business school of Pabianice. As for Raymond, he had to stay home and help his family.

His mother was doing all she could to supplement the too meager wages of her husband. She started a little shop where she sold herrings, sauerkraut, garlic, candles, shoelaces, and all the odds and ends necessary in the poor surroundings. Young Raymond had a head for figures and was soon able to replace her. She also worked as a midwife. Often she would be called away while she was preparing meals. During her absence Raymond was in charge of the family cooking and

managed very well. His mother tells us that he used to invent the most tasty dishes and often welcomed her with "a surprise." As an old woman, she still spoke of this with tears in her eyes.

Under these conditions, it seemed more and more evident that little Raymond's dreams would never be realized. He seemed made to measure goods and tend the counter.

It was significant that he never expressed his great desire; he simply obeyed. From that time, and probably since the apparition, we see him peacefully and often heroically submissive to the mysterious guidance of Providence. Throughout his life this was a striking fact, and it must be attributed to a special grace which coincided, perhaps, with his wonderful "meeting" with Our Lady. All favorites of the Blessed Virgin are heroes of obedience, reproducing her redemptive fiat in their lives even unto the supreme sacrifice. This is their mark of election. Evidently young Raymond did not know all that. The Blessed Virgin had not given him theological courses, but we can imagine her leaning over the little boy, telling him: "Do all they tell you and I will do the rest."

Providence arrived unexpectedly in the person of a pharmacist whose name was Kotowski. One day Madame Kolbe sent her little boy for the medicine of one of her nursing cases. Raymond, who had a very good memory, rattled off in one breath the Latin formula. The pharmacist looked at him a little disconcerted and asked, "How do you know what it is called?"

It would have been sufficient to answer that he was repeating word for word what his mother had said to him, but the

child, proud of the impressive effect, continued: "Father Jakowski teaches us Latin."

He was not yet a saint, and there was a note of conceit in his voice.

The pharmacist, delighted by this childish determination, continued to question him.

"That's all very well as far as Latin is concerned, but do you go to school?"

Then artlessly the boy confessed. "It's my older brother who goes to the business school. He is going to be a priest, but I have to remain at home to help my parents. There isn't enough money to send us both to school."

The pharmacist reflected for a moment. He liked the youngster. Then he made his decision.

"My boy, it is a shame to leave you this way. Come to my house and I will teach you. At the end of the year you will pass examinations with your brother."

Thanks to Mr. Kotowski, who with a word decided the future of Raymond Kolbe! Was he among those numberless obscure patriots who spent all their leisure time and energy teaching the children of the poor? Under the Russian occupation education was not free of charge. We know nothing about him except this fact and this intervention, which one day will bring him a little glory.

Raymond's delight proved too well how he had suffered from being unable to go to school. "He came back home as though he had wings," wrote his mother, "and at once related to me the marvelous good fortune that had befallen him."

Mr. Kotowski had seen aright. The youngster worked so hard that he caught up with his brother's studies and suc-

ceeded in his examinations. Then his parents decided to make even greater effort and sent him also to school.

According to the testimony of a schoolmate, Raymond was the most talented in his class, excelling chiefly in mathematics and solving all problems as if he were playing a game. "He was talented in everything."

Mrs. Kolbe continued to govern her boys with an iron hand. There was to be no playing truant! Chatting with girls was forbidden. We learn that the oldest son, Francis, was too much inclined to this frivolity. After the boys had studied their lessons, they had to help in the house so that not a moment would be lost.

Four years later, the Franciscan Fathers came to Pabianice to preach a mission and at the same time to recruit vocations. Gathering all the courage they could, Francis and Raymond went to the priests and asked admission to the Minor Seminary of Lwow. We do not know the details, but one fact is clear: the parents were in perfect accord with the idea. Their father accompanied them to Cracow in the Austrian zone. To reach it, they had to cross the frontier secretly, a maneuver familiar to the Poles since the partitioning of their fatherland. From Cracow, they took the train to Lwow. They were travelling alone for the first time in their lives and their hearts were beating hard! It was the beginning of the term of 1907. Raymond was thirteen years of age.