

THE PROCESS OF BEATIFICATION AND CANONIZATION OF MAXIMILIAN MARIA KOLBE

Słowa kluczowe: Maksymilian Maria Kolbe, Paweł VI, Jan Paweł II, beatyfikacja, kanonizacja

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The rites and ceremonies for Beatification and Canonization, as well as the formulas to be pronounced and other minor details, have been expressed in different ways, although they have essentially remained in doctrinal continuity.

The first Beatification in solemn form was that of St Francis de Sales, desired by Alexander VII. The rite took place in St Peter's Basilica in two separate phases. The first being in the morning of 8 January 1662 when the actual rite of Beatification was celebrated. The Apostolic *Brief*, dated 28 December 1661, was read out, with which the Pope conferred upon him the title of Blessed and the relative liturgical honors; the celebration of solemn Mass followed, at which the Bishop of Soissons presided. It was subsequently usual for a Canonical Bishop of the Vatican Chapter to preside at the Eucharistic celebration. The primary role in this morning rite was played by the Sacred Congregation for Rites. The second phase took place in the afternoon of the same day when the Pope entered the Basilica to venerate the new Blessed and to receive the plenary indulgence which he himself had bestowed upon the faithful who visited the Basilica that day. The practice begun by Alexander VII remained virtually unchanged until 1968, when the last Beatification according to that rite was celebrated¹.

* Fr. prof. dr hab. Zdzisław J. Kijas OFMConv – priest, conventual Franciscan, professor of theological sciences, long-time employee of the Roman Congregation for the Causes of Saints (Città del Vaticano), professor of the Pontificia Facoltà Teologica San Bonaventura-Seraphicum in Rome.

¹ cf. F. Veraja, *La Beatificazione. Storia, problemi, prospettive*, Rome, 1983, pp. 7–111. Cf. A. Szafrńska, *Święty naszych czasów: beatyfikacja i kanonizacja Ojca Maksymiliana Kolbego*, PAX, Warszawa 1983.

With the Beatification of Maximilian Kolbe (d. 1941), celebrated on the morning of 17 October 1971, Paul VI introduced the important innovation of presiding personally at the rite of Beatification. In successive beatifications (1972, 1974, 1975) Pope Paul VI, present at the celebration, received the *peroratio* and spoke the formula of beatification but did not celebrate Mass. At most, it was the Bishop of the new Blessed's Diocese who presided at the Eucharistic celebration. The *peroratio* was drafted by the Prefect of the Secretary of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints or also by the diocesan Bishop who presided at the Eucharistic celebration.

With the Beatification on 19 October 1975, the Pope resumed the practice of presiding at the Mass and continued to do so until 2004. Pope Benedict XVI decided that Cardinal José Saraiva Martins, Prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, should preside at the rites of Beatification on 14 May 2005. *De mandato Summi Pontificis*, the Cardinal read the Apostolic Letter with which the Pope conceded the title of Blessed to two Venerable Servants of God. Prior to this, the Bishops of the new Blessed's Dioceses briefly summed up their lives. Cardinal Józef Glemp, diocesan Archbishop, Primate of Poland, presided at the Beatification rites in Warsaw, Poland, on 19 June 2005².

THE FINAL DAYS OF MAXIMILIAN M. KOLBE

By 13 September 1939 Niepokalanów had been occupied by the invading Germans and most of its inhabitants had been deported to Germany. Among them was Maximilian Kolbe. But that exile did not last long and on 8 December the prisoners were set free. From the moment that he returned to Niepokalanów 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. 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, 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?”.

He would never know that kind of defeat; but a more obvious defeat was near. 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. A witness tells that in March of that year an SS guard, seeing this man in his habit girdled with a rosary, asked if he believed in Christ. When the priest calmly replied “I do”, the guard

² http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/csaints/documents/rc_con_csaints_doc_20050929_saraiva-martins-beatific_en.html (30 sierpnia 2020).

struck him. The SS 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 Father Maximilian was with over 300 others who were deported from Pawiak to Auschwitz. There he received his striped convict's garments and was branded with the number 16670. He was put to work immediately carrying blocks of stone for the construction of a crematorium wall. On the last day of May he was assigned with other priests to the Babice section which was under the direction of "Bloody" Krott, an ex-criminal.

THE FAME OF SANCTITY

Father Kolbe enjoyed the fame of sanctity while still alive. There are many *de visu* testimonies that confirm his heroic life, which was particular and uncommon. In Auschwitz, where hunger and hatred reigned and faith evaporated, Kolbe opened his heart to others and spoke of God's infinite love. He seemed never to think of himself. When food was brought in and everyone struggled to get his place in the queue so as to be sure of a share, Father 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.

There remained only the last act in the drama. The events are recorded in the sworn testimonials of former inmates of the camp, collected as part of the beatification proceedings. They are as follows: Tadeusz Joachimowski, clerk of Block 14A: "In the summer of 1941, most probably on the last day of July, the camp siren announced that there had been an escape. At the evening roll-call of the same day we, i.e. Block 14A, were formed up in the street between the buildings of Blocks 14 and 17. After some delay we were joined by a group of the Landwirtschafts-Kommando. During the count it was found that three prisoners from this Kommando had escaped: one from our Block and the two others from other Blocks. Lagerfuhrer Fritzsich 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)"³.

Jan Jakub Szegidewicz takes up the story from there: "After the group of doomed men had already been selected, a prisoner stepped out from the ranks of one of the Blocks. I recognized Father Kolbe. Owing to my poor knowledge of German I did not understand what they talked about, nor do I remember whether Kolbe spoke directly to Fritzsich. When making his request, Kolbe stood at attention and pointed at a former non-commissioned officer known to me from the camp. It could be inferred from the expression on Fritzsich's face that he was surprised at Kolbe's action. As the sign was given, Father Kolbe joined the ranks of the doomed and the non-commissioned officer left the ranks of the doomed and resumed his place in his Block;

³ Maximiliani M. Kolbe, *Positio super virtutibus. Responsio ad Animadversiones*, vol. I, Romae 1966, p. 139. You can also consult the longer passage reported in a text published on: <http://www.ewtn.com/saintsHoly/saints/M/stmaximilianmarykolbe.asp#ixzz3sQKVdp9H> (30 August 2020).

which meant that Fritzsich had consented to the exchange. A little later the doomed men were marched off in the direction of Block 13, the death Block”⁴.

The non-commissioned officer was Franciszek Gajowniczek. When the sentence of doom had been pronounced, Gajowniczek had cried out in despair, “O my poor wife, my poor children. I shall never see them again.” It was then that the unexpected had happened, and that from among the ranks of those temporarily reprieved, prisoner 16670 had stepped forward and offered himself in the other man’s place. Then the ten condemned men were led off to the dreaded Bunker, to the airless underground cells where men died slowly without food or water.

Bruno Borgowiec was an eyewitness of those last terrible days, for he was an assistant to the janitor and an interpreter in the underground Bunkers. He tells us what happened:

“In the cell of the poor wretches there were daily loud prayers, the rosary and singing, in which prisoners from neighboring cells also joined. When no SS men were in the Block I went to the Bunker to talk to the men and comfort them. Fervent prayers and songs to the Holy Mother resounded in all the corridors of the Bunker. I had the impression I was in a church. Kolbe was leading and the prisoners responded in unison. They were often so deep in prayer that they did not even hear that inspecting SS men had descended to the Bunker; and the voices fell silent only at the loud yelling of their visitors. When the cells were opened the poor wretches cried loudly and begged for a piece of bread and for water, which they did not receive, however. If any of the stronger ones approached the door he was immediately kicked in the stomach by the SS men, so that falling backwards on the cement floor he was instantly killed; or he was shot to death... Father Kolbe bore up bravely, he did not beg and did not complain but raised the spirits of the others... Since they had grown very weak, prayers were now only whispered. At every inspection, when almost all the others were now lying on the floor, Kolbe was seen kneeling or standing in the centre as he looked cheerfully in the face of the SS men. Two weeks passed in this way. Meanwhile one after another they died, until only Kolbe was left. This the authorities felt was too long; the cell was needed for new victims. So one day they brought in the head of the sick-quarters, a German, a common criminal named Bock, who gave Father Kolbe an injection of carbolic acid in the vein of his left arm. Kolbe, with a prayer on his lips, himself gave his arm to the executioner. Unable to watch this I left under the pretext of work to be done. Immediately after the SS men with the executioner had left I returned to the cell, where I found 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”⁵.

The heroism of Father Kolbe went echoing through Auschwitz. In that desert of hatred he had sown love. Mr Józef Stemler, former director of an important cultural institute in Poland, comments: “in those conditions... in the midst of a brutalization

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ Ibidem.

of thought and feeling and words such as had never before been known, man indeed became a ravening wolf in his relations with other men. And into this state of affairs came the heroic self-sacrifice of Maximilian. The atmosphere grew lighter, as this thunderbolt provoked its profound and salutary shock”⁶. Jerzy Bielecki declared that Father 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”⁷.

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”. Biographies were written, and everywhere there were claims of cures being brought about through his intercession. “The life and death of this one man alone – wrote the Polish bishops – can be proof and witness of the fact that the love of God can overcome the greatest hatred, the greatest injustice, even death itself”.

THE BEGINNING OF THE PROCESS

The *Code of Canon Law* of 1917, in Canons 1999–2141, prescribed a process of two stages: the first in the diocese, and the second in the Vatican Congregation. The diocesan process was to serve as an introduction to the cause to be presented in the forum of the Vatican Congregation, and contained three parts: 1) an informative process (*processus informativus*) concerning the fame of sanctity of the person’s life, his or her virtues and any miracles, or martyrdom; 2) a process of gathering the writings of the Servant of God (*processus super scripti*); and 3) a process concerning the lack of cult (*processus de non cultu*).

The acts of these processes, sent to the Congregation, served as a public edition. At the same time a censorship of the writings of the Servant of God was carried out in terms of the purity of his faith and customs. Then an advocate would prepare a position paper to introduce the cause formally (*positio super introductione causae*). The promoter of the faith would make his observations, to which the advocate of the cause would respond. Then the entire *positio*, with the observations and responses made, was discussed at a meeting of the Congregation. If the result of the discussion was positive, the Pope would designate a commission for the conduction of the cause (Canons 2065–2086). At this point the cause was removed from the jurisdiction of the Ordinary and placed exclusively in the hands of the Holy See.

By the decree of August 12, 1947, the Congregation of Sacred Rites authorized the Diocesan Curia of Padua to conduct the informative process. This regular process in Padua, along with the Rogatory Commissions in Warsaw, Nagasaki and Rome, lasted from 1948 to 1952. Seventy-five witnesses were questioned about the life and death of Father Maximilian Kolbe and about the unusual graces received through his intercession. After the examination of the Acts of the Process and the writings of the Servant of God by the Sacred Congregation, on March 16, 1960

⁶ Maximiliani M. Kolbe, *Positio super virtutibus. Responsio ad Animadversiones*, vol. I, Romae 1966, p. 139.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

Pope John XXIII signed the Decree to introduce the cause (*Decretum Introductionis Causae*) thus initiating the work of the *Commissione Introductionis Causae*. In the same year, on 14 October, the Pope gave a dispensation from Canon 2087 of the *Code of Canon Law*⁸ and allowed the building of the Apostolic Process *super fama* which was completed in 1963. The Congregation of Sacred Rites approved the importance of all the processes.

On November 13, 1965 Pope Paul VI gave a dispensation from Canon 2101 of the *Code of Canon Law*⁹, which required that any beatification process for Servants of God begin only after 50 years had passed from their death. In 1964 the Congregation of Rites declared the validity of all the apostolic processes, and on 6 December 1966 the same Congregation had a pre-preparatory meeting on the heroic nature of Kolbe's virtues. The outcome of that meeting, together with the observations of the Promoter and the Advocate's responses, comprised the topic of the preparatory meeting, which took place on 27 February 1968. The beatification process of Maximilian Kolbe was completed on January 30, 1969 by the General Congregation in the presence of Pope Paul VI who enunciated: "Father Maximilian Kolbe, the Servant of God, distinguished himself by the heroic virtues of faith, hope, and love of God and neighbor, and also by other moral virtues"¹⁰.

As a following step, the Postulation had to undertake a study of a presumed miracle required by the Congregation of Rites for the beatification. After gathering required medical evidence, the Postulator presented to the Congregation two cases, both Italian, which he regarded as miraculous healings. Thus began a study of this documentation by doctors, who in turn would ask for an evaluation on the part of the theological censors if the cures were judged medically valid.

THE MIRACLES

Maximilian did not perform any miracles. However, through his intercession, the Lord performed the following miracles which were used as evidence in his beatification and, subsequently, in his canonization cause. Immediately after the process concerning the heroism of virtues, the Postulator of the Order of Friars Minor Conventual, who was constituted the Actor of the Cause, started the *super miro* process, i. e., concerning any presumed miracle accomplished through the intercession of the Servant of God. The postulator of the Cause, Fr. Antonio Ricciardi OFMConv, presented two cases of presumed healings: one of Mrs. Angela Testoni and the other of

⁸ Can. 2087. §1. Edito decreto de non cultu, impetrentur a Summo Pontifice et expeditur a Cardinali Praefecto litterae remissoriales, quas vocant, ad instruendum processum apostolicum tum super fama sanctitatis, miraculorum aut martyrii, tum super virtutibus et miraculis in specie vel super martyrio eiusdemque causa. §2. Hi duo processus distincte fiant; sed primus omitti potest, si Cardinali Praefecto et Promotori fidei generali nec necessarium nec opportunum videatur de continuatione famae iterum inquirere.

⁹ Can. 2101. Disceptatio virtutum non ante quinquaginta annos a morte Servi Dei inchoanda est.

¹⁰ *Informatio*, [in] *Positio Maximiliani M. Kolbe. Aliae Novissimae Litterae Postulatoriae pro Causae Introductione*, Romae 1960, p. 3.

Mr. Francesco Luciani-Ranier. Two special processes were undertaken to examine the cases, one in the Vicariate of Rome and the other in the Archdiocesan curia of Sassari.

a. The cure of intestinal tuberculosis of Angela Testoni

This miraculous event took place in the afternoon of 24 July 1949, by recourse to Maximilian Kolbe and by placing his image on the sick part of the body. „In the same afternoon” – the woman swore – “I became aware that the abdominal pains had disappeared, and I began to feel with certainty that I could now eat without a problem. In fact, the following day I ate several times... After three or four days I got out of bed... (and) on 2 August... I even began to help the members of my family in the kitchen”.

The fact stood out clearly and unequivocally from all the testimonies, to the extent that the medical board declared unanimously that the healing had been “instantaneous, functionally perfect and lasting”: functionally, not anatomically perfect, because in the exam by the physical experts “a certain rigidity of the ilium” was found, but without “any alteration of the passage”.

For all of the components of the medical board, the healing of Angela Testoni bears a “preternatural or miraculous” character¹¹.

b. The second healing regarding the marquis Francesco Luciani-Ranier

His healing happened precisely on the night of 6 August 1950, and involved the cure of sclerosis/calcification of the arteries. The daughter of the man who was healed asserted that on the morning of 6 August her father „returned to normal”, to the extent that „after eating he wanted to get up” and we let him „sit in an armchair”. His eyes had become “alive, shining”, and his general appearance was „that of a healthy person”. The testimonies given concerning the cured man by his wife and by his son and daughter left no doubt that the healing had happened through the intercession of Kolbe. Specifically, on the evening of 5 August, when the condition of the marquis had become more serious, such that the doctors no longer held out any hope, the whole family recited together the prayer to the Servant of God printed on the back of the holy card, which was then placed back in its usual place under the pillow of the sick man.

He then rested peacefully during the night and, upon waking up in the morning, he had returned to his normal healthy state. On 7 August he received Holy Communion in thanksgiving to the Servant of God and continued to pray with a profound sense of gratitude¹².

¹¹ *Positio Maximiliani Mariae Kolbe. Vota trium consultorum. Peculiaris Congressus super miris, die 27 aprilis an. 1971. Relatio et Vota*, p. 4.

¹² *Positio Maximiliani Mariae Kolbe. Vota trium consultorum. Peculiaris Congressus super miris, die 27 aprilis an. 1971. Relatio et Vota*, p. 39.

THE BEATIFICATION

The cause of beatification of Fr. Kolbe was introduced by way of his virtues, and not on account of his martyrdom. The beatification of Kolbe took place only 30 years after his death. With the Beatification of Maximilian Kolbe, celebrated on the morning of 17 October 1971, Paul VI introduced the important innovation of presiding personally at the rite of Beatification. Thus, the afternoon ceremony during which the Holy Father would visit the Basilica to venerate the new Blessed and receive the plenary indulgence, was abolished. For the first time, a „beatification formula” was drafted that was read by the Pope himself. Until then, the Congregation for Rites had been of the opinion that “even if the Pope intervened, there must be a clear distinction in solemnity between canonization and beatification”¹³.

In this great solemnity of the beatification the following participated: 44 cardinals, 5 patriarchs, about 300 bishops with those attending the Bishop’s Synod from all over the world, the entire Vatican diplomatic corps. After the „Kyrie” Archbishop F. Antonelli, secretary of the Congregation of Sacred Rites, accompanied by the Father A. Ricciardi OFMConv, general postulator, petitioned Pope Paul VI to condescend to raise to the altars Venerable Servant, Father Maximilian. Following the petition Paul VI read with the decree of beatification:

In response to the petitions of our many Brothers Bishops, of the entire Franciscan Order as well as of the numerous faithful; and after the consultation with the Sacred Congregation of Sacred Rites, as well as serious deliberation and prayer for light from above, with our apostolic authority and power we hereby include the honorable Servant of God, Maximilian Kolbe, priest of the aforesaid Franciscan Order, among the blessed and that his feast be observed annually – In places and in a manner approved by law – on the day of his death, August 14th, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit¹⁴.

The Pope delivered a homily and said:

Maximilian Kolbe-Blessed! What does this mean? It means that the Church recognizes in him an exceptional figure, a man in whom God’s grace and the soul have so interacted as to produce a stupendous life. Anyone who observes it closely discovers this symbiosis of a dual operating principle, the divine and the human. One is mysterious, the other can be experienced; One is transcendent but interior, the other natural but complex, and expanded to the point of reaching that extraordinary image of moral and spiritual greatness that we call holiness; that is, perfection reached on the religious

¹³ Bishop Antonelli, Secretary of the Dicastery: Archives of the Congregation, V AR 107/966 [in] G. Stano, *Il rito della Beatificazione da Alessandro VII ai nostri giorni*, in *Miscellanea per il quarto Centenario della Congregazione della Cause dei Santi [1588–1988]*, Vatican City, 1988, p. 401.

¹⁴ J.M. Mlodozienec, *I knew Blessed Maximilian. The life and death of Blessed Maximilian Kolbe, Friar Minor Conventual (1894–1941)*, AMI Press, Washington, 1971, p. 103.

parameter, which as we know, soars towards the infinite heights of the Absolute. ‘Blessed’, therefore, means worthy of that veneration permitted by the Church in certain places and among certain groups, a veneration that implies admiration of the one who is their object because of some unusual and magnificent reflection of the Sanctifying Spirit in him. It means ‘saved and glorious’. It means ‘citizen of heaven’ with all the peculiar signs of a citizen of earth; it means ‘brother and friend’ whom we know is still ours, more so than ever, in fact, because he is identified as an active member of the Communion of Saints, which is the Mystical Body of Christ, the Church, living both in time and in eternity. It means, therefore, ‘advocate and protector’ in the kingdom of love, together with Christ “who is always able to save those who approach God through him, since he forever lives to make intercession for them” (Heb. 7,25: cf. Rom. 8,34). Finally, it means ‘exemplary specimen’-a type of man to whom we can conform our way of life, since he, the Blessed, is recognized as having the apostle Paul’s privilege of being able to say to the Christian people “I beg you then, be imitators of me” (I Cor. 4,16)¹⁵.

With the beatification of Father Kolbe the first stage of his canonization process was concluded. Maximilian was beatified as a *Confessor* and Pope Paul VI presented him as a man enamored of the Immaculate Virgin Mary and a zealous and inspired apostle of Jesus Christ. After the celebrations of thanksgiving which took place in various parts of the world, the Postulator set himself to the task of carrying the Cause forward: that is, to present the material necessary for the canonization of Blessed Maximilian Kolbe. In this case he preferred to undertake a different course: no longer by way of his virtues, but rather through his presumed martyrdom. He thought, then, of proposing as a unity the way of a virtuous life which was also the life of a martyr. This road to canonization coming from two directions was unknown until that time, a postulation which was the first of its kind.

THE FAME OF MARTYRDOM

According to the norms of the Congregation concerning the Church’s recognition of martyrdom, one needs to examine in the legal proceedings not only the fact of the martyrdom itself and its causes, but also the existence of the fame of the martyrdom and its supernatural signs, namely, miracles.

Martyrdom in the Catholic sense is verified only when the Servant of God endures and suffers death because the persecutor acts moved by hatred of the faith or of Christian principles. It deals with the fundamental motive involved in the persecution of the Servant of God, even though this motivation may be mixed with other reasons; or perhaps the other motives stand out more for various causes, convenient or useful to the persecutors themselves. These various motivations may be perceived

¹⁵ http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/it/homilies/1971/documents/hf_p-vi_hom_19711017.html (30 sierpnia 2020). See also: *Litterae Apostolicae quibus Maximiliano M. Kolbe beatorum honores decernuntur Paulus pp. VI, [in] Compendium vitae virtutum et miraculorum necnon actorum in causa canonizationis beati Maximiliani Mariae Kolbe*, Romae 1982, p. 13–20.

by means of the words or actions of the persecutors, or even from the circumstances which accompany the death.

The examination of the formal cause is easier when the one who kills is an individual person. It is notably more difficult to discover when one is dealing with a legal entity or a group of persons: for example, officials of the state authorities, those of a concentration camp, and other similar persons.

In the case of Fr. Maximilian Kolbe, the executioner was not only one concrete person, such as Fritzsch, Palitzsch, the Commander or one of the SS, but Nazism as such, which acted through the organs of the party, by means of the whole administrative state apparatus, especially the police and the concentration camps. The firm determination to destroy the Christian religion, the Catholic Church, the clergy, the places of worship and of religious activity: this was the persecution, in this consisted the hatred for which innocent people were dying – only because they were believers, because they prayed, because they belonged to the Catholic Church, because they were members of diocesan or religious clergy¹⁶.

In the homily at the beatification of Father Kolbe, Pope Paul VI did not fail to remember the tragic death which Fr. Kolbe suffered, and which was to become henceforth the reason to carry on his Cause by way of his alleged martyrdom. On that occasion the Pope said:

“Let us consider the tragic and sublime conclusion of Maximilian Kolbe’s innocent and apostolic life. It is mainly to this that we owe the glorification of the meek humble, hard-working religious, exemplary follower of St. Francis and knight in love with Mary Immaculate that the Church celebrates today. The circumstances of his departure from this life are so horrible and harrowing that we would prefer not to speak of them, and never to contemplate them again, in order not to see the depths of inhuman degradation to which the abuse of power can lead, an abuse which seeks to make a pedestal of grandeur and glory from the impassive cruelty it inflicts upon helpless beings that it has degraded to the rank of slaves and doomed to extermination...

One of these points, perhaps the one glowing most brightly, is the calm, drained figure of Maximilian Kolbe. A serene hero, always pious and sustained by a paradoxical, yet reasonable confidence. His name will remain among the great; it will reveal what reserves of moral values lay among those unhappy masses, petrified by horror and despair”¹⁷.

From the beginning, the Postulator of the beatification of the Servant of God Maximilian Kolbe wanted to set up his Cause by way of martyrdom. He preferred, however, to undertake the classical road, i. e., to assure first the heroic virtuous life of the Servant of God; then, after the investigations required by the Congregation of Rites and approved by the Pontiff, to take also the path of his martyrdom.

¹⁶ J. Bar, *Il martirio di Massimiliano Kolbe*, Roma, 1975, p. 82.

¹⁷ http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/it/homilies/1971/documents/hf_p-vi_hom_19711017.html (30 sierpnia 2020).

According to the Postulator of the Cause, it did not seem difficult to agree on the tyrant's hatred for the faith: a) on the part of the Commander-in-Chief of the Auschwitz camp, Rudolph Höss, an apostate from the Catholic faith and a fanatical follower of Hitler's ideology¹⁸; and b) on the part of the actual Executive Officer, Karl Fritsch, and his immediate subordinate, Palitsch, and of the other SS officers, including Krott¹⁹.

In all of them, besides the *remote disposition* against the faith which is found in the hitlerian doctrine with its hypnotizing anti-Christian ideology²⁰, there is the *proximate disposition* in the shared determination to torment and to exterminate the priests in the concentration camps. The Postulator added that the active disposition against the faith, and precisely against the Catholic priesthood on the part of Fritsch and Palitsch, was to be seen in the decision they made to accept the offer of Father Kolbe, after considering his declaration responding to their formal question: „I am a Catholic priest”. Thus, to this remote, proximate and actual intention of the tyrant in opposition to the faith, the Postulator added the *will* to condemn an act dictated by the exercise of a virtue suggested by the faith, that of charity to one's neighbor. It was this last action, as presented by the Postulator, which proved decisively the tyrant's hatred in the case of the martyrdom of Father Kolbe.

The Postulator of the cause emphasized that in this form of holocaust, in which one's life is offered for another's salvation, there are *two moments*: in the *first*, that of the sacrifice, the martyr himself is the executioner: Christ „qui oblatuſ est quia ipſe voluit” and, after the example of Jesus Father Kolbe, who voluntarily, not chosen, stepped out of the ranks; we have the *second moment* when, once the offer was accepted, the sacrifice of his life was consummated by an executioner – as is required by the theological doctrine – distinct from the martyr²¹. In the martyrdom *par excellence* of Jesus Christ, all of those responsible for the sacrifice of the cross became executioners after the words: “Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then should the scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?” (Mt 26:53–54). In the martyrdom of Fr. Kolbe, in some ways similar to that of Jesus Christ, the executioner became Fritsch when he ordered Gajowniczek to return to his place in the ranks and the Servant of God to take a place among the ten condemned to the bunker.

However, beyond the gratification of condemning a Catholic priest, beyond the desire to condemn an exercise of charity, there was in the sacrifice of Father Kolbe a circumstance which proved the persistent desire of Fritsch and his companions to pursue what had been done by Fr. Kolbe. The *Acts* certify that, since Kolbe and four others lasted a long time (in the bunker), the decision was made to kill them by means of an injection with carbolic acid. Father Kolbe was killed with the fatal

¹⁸ Cf. Rudolf Höss, *Kommandant in Auschwitz [1940–1943]*, Deutsche Verlag-Anstalt, Stuttgart 1958.

¹⁹ Maximiliani M. Kolbe, *Positio super virtutibus. Responsio ad Animadversiones*, vol. I, Romae 1966, p. 134.

²⁰ Cf. *Enciclopedia Cattolica*, vol. VI, voce *Hitler A.*, coll. 1442s.

²¹ Prospero Lambertini (Benedictus XIX), *De Servorum Dei beatificatione et de Beatorum canonizatione*, lib. III, c. XI, n. 1).

injection of carbolic acid, while the perpetrators were aware and conscious that he was in that bunker for *love*, that is, *he was consummating his sacrifice of charity* following the example of Jesus crucified. The Postulator then associated Kolbe's cause with the martyr's death of St. Stanislaus, Bishop of Cracow, who was killed while celebrating the Mass in his cathedral.

In addition, in order to prove the martyr's death of Father Kolbe, the permissibility of the sacrifice offered by Fr. Kolbe was studied. In the course of the elaboration of the *Positio* it was seen that the heroic life of the Servant of God confirmed the sincerity of his life: that is, that in his final gesture he was indeed moved by the impulse of God. Even the good fruits which resulted from his death confirm that the action of Kolbe was a gift of the Holy Spirit. The Witness XXX Apost., 3 *ex officio* from Warsaw, Dr. Rudolph Diem, a non-Catholic, admitted: "After the martyr's death of the Servant of God in the camp, I heard how the prisoners generally admired his heroic act. Even I personally admired the Servant of God, and to this day I hold for him an extraordinary esteem and admiration"²².

THE CANONIZATION

The canonization of Blessed Maximilian Kolbe took place in Rome on 10 October 1982. In the homily of the canonization ceremony Pope St. John Paul II highlighted the fact of his martyrdom, even the formal aspect of martyrdom both from the side of the persecutor and from the side of the victim. He said in this respect,

"Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends (John 15:13). From today on, the Church desires to address as "Saint" a man who was granted the grace of carrying out these words of the Redeemer in an absolutely literal manner.

For towards the end of July, 1941, when the camp commander ordered the prisoners destined to die of starvation to fall in line, this man – Maximilian Maria Kolbe – spontaneously came forward and declared himself ready to go to death in the place of one of them. This readiness was accepted and, after more than two weeks of torment caused by starvation, Father Maximilian's life was ended with a lethal injection on August 14, 1941.

All this happened in the concentration camp at Auschwitz where during the last war some four million people were put to death, including the Servant of God, Edith Stein (the Carmelite Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross), whose cause for beatification is in progress at the competent Congregation. Disobedience to God – the Creator of life who said, "Thou shalt not kill" – caused in that place the immense holocaust of so many innocent persons. And so at the same time, our age has thus been horribly stigmatized by the slaughter of the innocent.

²² Maximiliani M. Kolbe, *Positio super virtutibus. Responsio ad Animadversiones*, vol. I, Romae 1966, p. 140.

Father Maximilian Kolbe, himself a prisoner of the concentration camp, defended in that place of death an innocent man's right to life. Father Kolbe defended his right to life, declaring that he was ready to go to death in the man's place, because he was the father of a family and his life was necessary for his dear ones. Father Maximilian Maria Kolbe thus reaffirmed the Creator's exclusive right over innocent human life. He bore witness to Christ and to love. For the Apostle John writes: "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (1 John 3:16).

The Church has venerated Father Maximilian as "Blessed" since 1971. By laying down his life for a brother, he made himself like Christ.

Gathered today before the Basilica of St. Peter in Rome, we wish to express the special value which Father Maximilian Kolbe's death by martyrdom has in the eyes of God. "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints". These are the words we have repeated in today's responsorial psalm. It is truly precious and inestimable! Through the death which Christ underwent on the Cross, the redemption of the world was achieved, for this death has the value of supreme love. Through the death of Father Maximilian Kolbe, a shining sign of this love was renewed in our century which is so seriously and in so many ways threatened by sin and death.

In this canonization liturgy there seems to appear before us that "martyr of love" of Auschwitz (as Paul VI called him), saying: "O Lord, I am thy servant. I am thy servant, the son of thy handmaid. Thou has loosed my bonds" (Psalms 115 (116):16). And as though gathering together in one sacrifice the whole of his life, he—a priest and a spiritual son of saint Francis—seems to say: "What shall I render to the Lord for his bounty to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord" (Psalms 115 (116):12).

These are words of gratitude. Death undergone out of love—in the place of one's brother—is an heroic act of man. It is an act through which, together with the one already beatified, we glorify God. For from God comes the grace of such heroism, of this martyrdom. Therefore let us today glorify God's great work in man. Before all of us gathered here, Father Maximilian Kolbe lifts up his "cup of salvation". In it is contained the sacrifice of his whole life, sealed with the martyr's death "for a brother."

Maximilian prepared for this definitive sacrifice by following Christ from the first years of his life in Poland. From these years comes the mysterious vision of two crowns—one white and one red. From these our saint does not choose. He accepts them both. From the years of his youth, in fact, Maximilian was filled with the great love of Christ and the desire for martyrdom²³.

The Pope put an end to the long discussion about the presumed martyrdom of Fr. Kolbe when he declared solemnly: "And so, in virtue of my apostolic authority,

²³ http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/homilies/1982/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19821010_canonizzazione-kolbe.html (31 sierpnia 2020).

I have decreed that Maximilian Maria Kolbe – who after his Beatification was venerated as a Confessor – shall henceforward be venerated also as a Martyr!”

There was a great crowd in St. Peter’s Square, more than 250,000 pilgrims who had come from different parts of the world, gathered in front of a big banner hanging from the central loggia, bearing the portrait of Father Kolbe. So many of those present did not know if Fr. Kolbe, already Blessed, was now being canonized as a confessor or as a martyr. The answer came immediately, as soon as the Pope exited the basilica and processed into the square wearing red vestments – the liturgical color of martyrs. Moreover, the words indicated here from the Holy Father’s homily declared Kolbe – the holy martyr.

John Paul II thus defined an important theological argument, namely, affirming that a systematic hatred regarding the human person (*odium hominis*) was a modern equivalent to the traditional criterion for classifying martyrdom, i.e., the *odium fidei*. “From the moment that the Christian faith affirmed the truth of the inalienable dignity of the human person, whoever had maintained hatred for this truth would have had, implicitly, hatred for the Christian faith. Modern totalitarianism was, therefore, an implicit form of *odium fidei*, because it reduced men to things”²⁴.

Three months after the canonization of Father Kolbe, on 25 January 1983, the Pope promulgated an important Apostolic Constitution, *Divinus Perfectione Magister*. This document of the Holy Father reformed radically the process by which the Church recognized the holiness of one of her sons or daughters.

The Apostolic Constitution *Divinus Perfectione Magister* represented a real turning point²⁵. The new procedures also reflected in part the profound sensitivity of the Pope, his conception of history as a stage on which the freedom of God and that of man are played out in a drama in which eternal salvation itself is at stake.

* * *

The process of beatification and canonization of Father Maximilian M. Kolbe had enormous significance not only for the Church, as a body who promoted one of her sons to a state of canonized holiness. Apart from this, Kolbe’s process made the Church reflect on the theological category itself called martyrdom, which came to see deep changes in the modern era, particularly in the 20th Century. Kolbe’s case provided the occasion to drive home once more, in an even stronger way, the dignity of the human person and the strength of God’s grace which acts in even the most difficult situations lived by humanity. Maximilian Kolbe, named by St. John Paul II „the patron of our difficult century”, became also „patron” of many new martyrs of ideological systems.

²⁴ G. Weigel, *Testimone della speranza. La vita di Giovanni Paolo II*, vol. 1, Oscar Mondadori 2005, p. 556.

²⁵ Cf. Congregazione delle Cause dei Santi, *Le cause dei santi. Sussidio per lo Studium*, LEV 2012.

THE PROCESS OF BEATIFICATION AND CANONIZATION OF MAXIMILIAN MARIA KOLBE

SUMMARY

The glory of holiness that Maximilian Maria Kolbe enjoyed while still alive remained alive after his heroic death, and even grew and enlarged, also through the extraordinary favors received through his intercession. The Franciscan Order therefore decided to begin the canonical process of his beatification. Canonical research was carried out in the Padua Curia in 1948–1952, and auxiliary research in Warsaw and Nagasaki in 1948–1951, to finally be sent to the Congregation of Holy Rites in Rome. On May 12, 1955, a decree was issued on the reviewed and researched writings attributed to the Servant of God Maximilian Maria Kolbe. In the meantime, numerous letters of postulation were sent to the Holy See from cardinals, archbishops and bishops, superiors of orders from almost all over the world, with a request to start the beatification process. They ended with a solemn beatification in the Basilica of St. Peter in Rome on October 17, 1971, presided over by Pope Paul VI. About 150,000 people attended the ceremony, including about 6,000 Poles. The official Polish delegation was headed by Card. Stefan Wyszyński – the Primate of Poland. Father Kolbe's canonization took place eleven years later, on October 10, 1982. The canonization mass in St. Peter in Rome was presided over by the Polish Pope John Paul II.

PROCES BEATYFIKACYJNY I KANONIZACYJNY MAKSYMILIANA MARII KOLBEGO

STRESZCZENIE

Sława świętości, którą Maksymilian Maria Kolbe cieszył się jeszcze za życia, pozostała żywa po jego heroicznej śmierci, a nawet rozrosła się i powiększyła, również poprzez nadzwyczajne łaski, otrzymane za jego wstawiennictwem. Zakon franciszkański postanowił więc rozpocząć kanoniczny proces jego beatyfikacji. Badania kanoniczne odbyły się w Kurii Padewskiej w latach 1948–1952, pomocnicze zaś w Warszawie i w Nagasaki w 1948–1951, by ostatecznie przesłać je do Kongregacji Świętych Obrzędów w Rzymie. Dnia 12 maja 1955 r. wydany został dekret o przejranych i zbadanych pismach, przypisywanych Słudze Bożemu Maksymilianowi Marii Kolbe. W międzyczasie napływały do Stolicy Apostolskiej bardzo liczne listy postulacyjne od kardynałów, arcybiskupów i biskupów, przełożonych zakonów z całego niemal świata, z prośbą o rozpoczęcie procesu beatyfikacyjnego. Zakończyły się one uroczystą beatyfikacją w bazylice św. Piotra w Rzymie w dniu 17 października 1971, której przewodniczył papież Paweł VI. Na uroczystość tą przybyło około 150 tysięcy osób, w tym około 6 tysięcy Polaków. Oficjalnej delegacji polskiej przewodniczył kard. Stefan Wyszyński – Prymas Polski. Kanonizacja ojca Kolbe miała miejsce jedenaście lat później, w dniu 10 października 1982. Mszy kanonizacyjnej na placu św. Piotra w Rzymie przewodniczył papież Polak Jan Paweł II.

DER SELIG- UND HEILIGSPRECHUNGSPROZESS VON MAXIMILIAN MARIA KOLBE

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Der Ruhm der Heiligkeit, den Maximilian Maria Kolbe zu Lebzeiten genoss, blieb auch nach seinem Heldentod lebendig und wuchs sogar, auch dank den außerordentlichen Gnaden, die man durch seine Vermittlung erhielt. Der Franziskanerorden beschloss daher, den kanonischen Prozess seiner Seligsprechung einzuleiten. Zwischen 1948 und 1952 fanden an der Kurie von Padua kanonische Forschungen statt, und im Zeitraum von 1948 bis 1951 erfolgten Hilfsforschungen in Warschau und Nagasaki, die schließlich an die Heilige Ritenkongregation in Rom weitergeleitet wurden. Am 12. Mai 1955 wurde ein Dekret über die revidierten und geprüften Schriften erlassen, die dem Diener Gottes Maximilian Maria Kolbe zugeschrieben wurden. In der Zwischenzeit wurden viele Postulatbriefe von Kardinälen, Erzbischöfen und Bischöfen, Oberen von Ordensgemeinschaften aus aller Welt, an den Heiligen Stuhl geschickt mit der Bitte, den Seligsprechungsprozess einzuleiten. Sie endeten mit einer feierlichen Seligsprechung im Petersdom in Rom am 17. Oktober 1971 unter dem Vorsitz von Papst Paul VI. An der Zeremonie nahmen etwa 150 Tausend Menschen teil, darunter etwa 6 Tausend Polen. Die offizielle polnische Delegation wurde von Kardinal Stefan Wyszyński, dem Primas von Polen, geleitet. Elf Jahre später, am 10. Oktober 1982, fand die Heiligsprechung von Maximilian Kolbe statt. Die Heiligsprechungsmesse auf dem Petersplatz in Rom wurde von dem polnischen Papst Johannes Paul II. geleitet.

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