

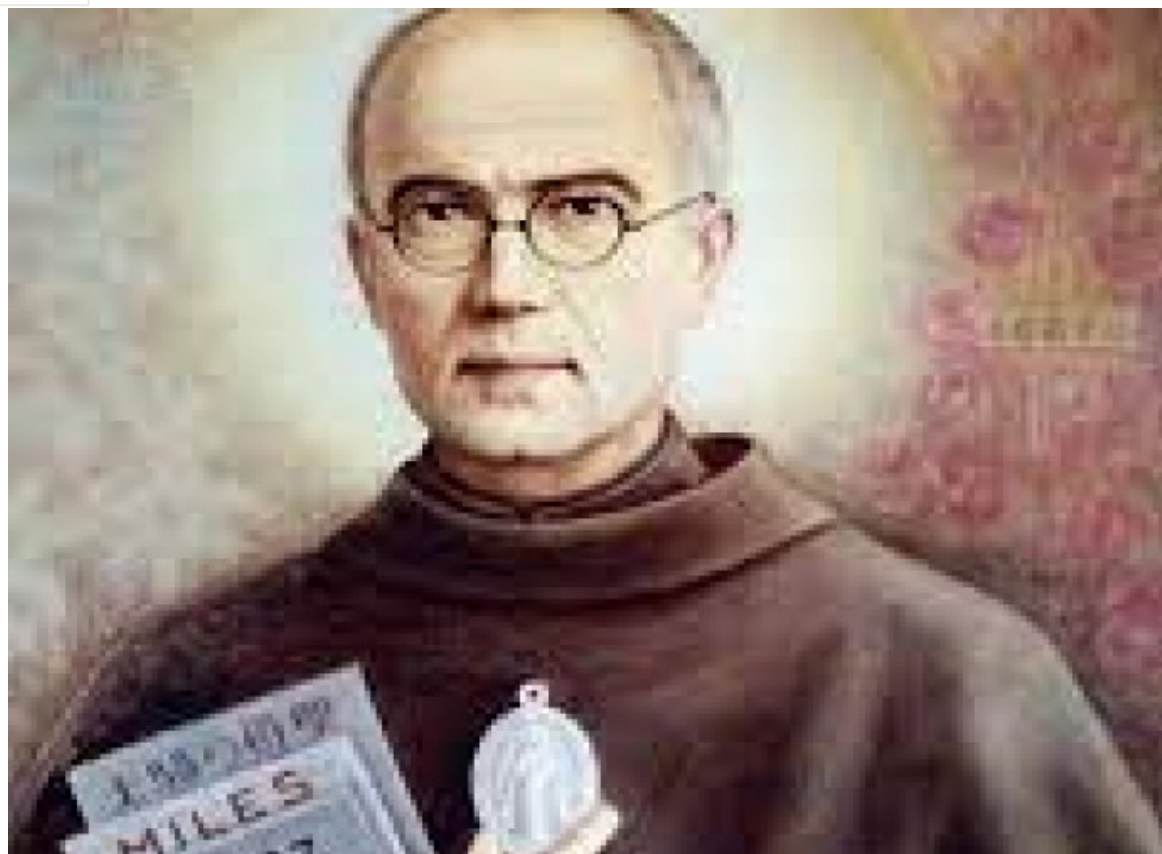
INTERVIEW

The Miraculous Medal, Father Kolbe's "love bullet"

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"O Mary conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to you. Then a voice was heard saying: 'Have a medal forged on this model. All those who wear it around their necks will receive great graces, and they will be abundant for those who wear it with

confidence". It is St Catherine Labouré who recounts that renowned 27 November 1830. The Immaculate Virgin had already appeared to her a few months earlier, on the night between 18th and 19th July. While the last apparition would be in December of the same year, the most famous will remain the one linked to the Miraculous Medal, a sign of love between the Virgin and Her children. A sign to which Saint Maximilian Mary Kolbe, the Polish priest and Franciscan who was killed on 14 August 1941 in Auschwitz concentration camp, was particularly attached.

The *Daily Compass* asked Father Raffaele Di Muro, Rector of the Pontifical Faculty of Theology St. Bonaventure-Seraphicum in Rome and Director of the Kolbe Chair at the same academic institution, to explain the meaning of the Medal in the life of this saint, whose name remains inextricably linked to that of the Virgin.

Father Di Muro, how did the devotion to the Miraculous Medal originate in Saint Maximilian Mary Kolbe?

We do not know exactly when his particular devotion to the Medal began. Certainly such a devotion could only find fertile ground in him: it entered his soul when his heart was already "palpitating" for the Virgin Mary. We can also say that it was fully part of his spiritual and human journey: thus, his soul breathed in everything that the Church of the time was living and sharing. The Medal was part of the devotions of the time and Saint Maximilian internalised all this: it was precisely his Christian feeling, his feeling that he was an integral part of the Church, that enabled him to become acquainted with the Medal, a knowledge that very presumably came about during the Roman period of his formation, when he was staying in the St. Bonaventure College in Rome, a few steps from the Roman Forum.

How important was the presence of the Miraculous Medal in the Work of the Militia Immaculatae he founded?

From the very first moment, in 1917, it was important. It was thanks to the Medal that every member of the Militia Immaculatae felt a sense of belonging to the same association of the faithful. It was for them - as it was for the first seven young founding brothers - the tangible sign of being part of one big family: that of the Mother, the Virgin Mary. We also know that from the very beginning those young friars went out into the streets of Rome to distribute the Medal to anyone they met on their way: this was a way of talking about the Virgin, since the moment they handed it over they would begin a short catechesis on the Medal, on its religious and historical meaning. Just as it had been precious for those first seven brothers, so it is today: they continue that same Marian apostolate in the footsteps of St Maximilian Kolbe with love and perseverance.

During his days of captivity in Auschwitz in 1941, did St. Maximilian have the Medal with him?

It can be assumed that in those terrible days Saint Maximilian could not have had the Medal with him: it must be pointed out that once inside the prison camp, each prisoner was stripped of all the objects he had with him. Therefore, it is easy to think that the Polish saint did not have the Medal. But one thing is certain: drawings of the Medal have been found on some cell walls in Auschwitz. It is very moving to think about this! Maximilian most likely also drew the precious Marian sign on the wall. Obviously, before it was drawn on the walls, the Medal was carved in his heart!

How important was St. Maximilian Kolbe for the history of the spreading of the Medal?

I would say very important, even fundamental! For several aspects: not only for his apostolic action in materially spreading the Medal, but also for what he wrote about it. Kolbe called it a "love bullet": the times in which Saint Maximilian lives and works are times of war and, with that very particular term, Kolbe teaches the power of love. If bullets made of gunpowder killed people, those "of love" manage to propagate life and hope. And then there are the many writings in which we find catechesis and explanations of the meaning of the Medal itself: from the Knight of the Immaculate, the Militia's press organ, to personal letters. It is all a continuous explanation of the value of this important Marian sign.

The Miraculous Medal and the Militia of the Immaculata today: How important is the Medal for the apostolate today?

Even today, the Medal continues to be the predominant motif of the Militia's apostolate:

a Militia Immaculatae never goes out without having some in their pocket. It is distributed in many places: from the common street to prisons; from places of suffering such as hospitals to simple domestic places. The Medal still remains the most important sign that the Militia spreads thanks to its members. Society may change, but the value and meaning of that gesture - of giving the Medal to those one meets - remains enormously precious. St Maximilian Kolbe taught us this and we seek to continue his work. A work that underlines that only with the Virgin Mary is it possible to walk and belong totally to her Son Jesus, only with her can we be bearers of hope, solidarity and lasting love.