

PRAYER VIGIL
In honor of St. Maximilian Maria Kolbe

Introduction

- G.** «Holy Mary, tender and strong Mother, our incredible companion along the journey of life! Grant that we may experience such a vivid sadness for our slackness as to feel the need to quicken our steps, so that, after having come up by your side, we may take you by the hand and walk with you.»

During this prayer vigil, we commemorate the «great things» that God accomplished in Mary and we renew our communion with her, a woman of our race and our sister in faith. In Mary, in fact, God's history becomes our history. Thanks to her YES, He begins to reveal Himself as our only Savior and to walk with his Mother along the paths of our humanity.

We commemorate also St. Maximilian Kolbe's martyrdom of love, which was consummated in the concentration camp of Auschwitz, on August 14, 1941. St. Maximilian Kolbe, «special patron of our difficult times,» is a man whose life and death challenge us, because they speak of the contradictory tensions of our world, where the extremes of the negative cruelty of hatred and the heroic creativity of love meet. Kolbe is a man who fascinates us because, even if he is a teacher and a witness, we feel him to be close to us. He is not a foreign figure, but a person who lived the sad and great events of our time and nourished himself with a culture similar to ours. He did not look for the sensational in his life, but rather lived with responsible fidelity the weight of his daily work. In his life and death each of us can find the key for giving a Christian meaning and value to one's daily life.

INVITATION TO PRAISE

- P.** In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

A. Amen.

- P.** Grace and peace to you, dear brothers and sisters, from God our Father and Our Lord and Bother Jesus Christ, who has sent us his Spirit and has called us to live in his love, so that the world may believe and hold on to the hope of His return, according to the Father's will, to whom be glory, for ever and ever.

A. Amen.

- P.** God the Father chose Mary from all eternity,

A. before the world began.

B. Christ loved Her and handed Himself for Her,

A. that He might present Her to Himself whole holy, in splendor, and immaculate.

P. The Holy Spirit overshadowed Her,

A. and She became the Mother of God.

- P.** Let us pray.

God, Father of mercy, in Mary, the first fruit of redemption, you have given us a Mother of immense tenderness. Open our hearts to the joy of the Holy Spirit and grant that, following her example, we may learn to magnify your name for the wonderful work

accomplished in Christ your Son, Who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever.

A. Amen.

SONG

READING FROM THE GOSPEL OF ST. LUKE (1:26-38 - with excerpts from St. Bernard's Homily)

I L. In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man name Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary. And coming to her, he said, «Hail favored one! The Lord is with you:» But she was greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

II L. Then the angel said to her, «Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. he will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and his kingdom will have no end.»

Refrain

I L. But Mary said to the angel, «How can this be, since i have no relations with a man?» And the angel said to her in reply, «The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. And behold, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren; for nothing is impossible for God.»

II L. *«You have heard, O Virgin, that the angel awaits an answer: it is time for him to return to God who sent him. We too are waiting, O Lady, for your word of compassion. In the eternal Word of God we all came to be, and behold, we die. In your brief response we are to be remade in order to be recalled to life.»*

Refrain

I L. *«This is what the whole earth waits for, prostrate at your feet. Answer quickly, O Virgin. Answer with a word, receive the Word of God. Speak your own word, conceive the divine Word. Breathe a passing word, embrace the eternal Word.»*

II L. *«Open your heart to faith, O blessed Virgin, your lips to praise, your womb to the creator. See, the Desired of all nations is at your door, knocking to enter. Arise, hasten, open. Arise in faith, hasten in devotion, open in praise and thanksgiving.»*

Refrain

I L. Mary said, «Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word.» Then the angel departed from her.

Refrain

Silence and quiet reflection

PRAYER TO MARY

- G.** The life of each person is an interior journey of faith and love in order to encounter God who dwell within one's heart and to discover the face of one's brothers and sisters to be loved. Maximilian Kolbe's life was a journey marked by «yes», pronounced moment by moment. The saints, in fact, are pilgrims, who risk everything for God. They give their life, soul, joy, every earthly bond, and every riches, without asking for anything back. Free and alone, launched toward the Infinite, they obtain that Love may introduce them in his eternal kingdom, but already in this life their hearts are filled with love, true love, the only Love.

READING FROM THE BOOK OF THE PROPHET ISAIAH (43:1-4)

- L.** Thus says the Lord: Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name: you are mine. When you pass through the water, I will be with you; in the rivers you shall not drown. When you walk through fire, you shall not be burned; the flames shall not consume you. For I am the Lord, your God: you are precious in my eyes and glorious, and I love you.

FROM THE WRITINGS OF ST. MAXIMILIAN KOLBE (KW 1145)

Who would dare imagine that you, O infinite, eternal God, have loved me for centuries, or to be more precise, from before the beginning of the centuries? In fact, you have loved me ever since you have existed as God; thus, you have always loved me and you shall always love me!... Your love for me was already there, even when i had no existence, and precisely because you loved me, O good God, you called me from nothingness to existence!...For me you have created the skies scattered with stars, for me the earth, the seas, the mountains, the streams, and all the beautiful things on earth... Still, this did not satisfy you: to show me close up that you loved me so tenderly, you came down from the purest delights of heaven to this tarnished and tear-ridden world, you lived amidst poverty, hard work and suffering, and finally, despised and mocked, you let yourself be suspended in torment on a vile scaffold between two criminals... O God of love, you have redeemed me in this terrible, though generous, fashion!... Who would venture to imagine it?

Refrain

Yet, you were not satisfied with this, you knew that no fewer than nineteen centuries would still have to pass from the moment you poured out these demonstrations of your love to the time I was to be born, so you decided to take care of this too! You Heart did not consent to let my only nourishment be the memories of your boundless love. You have remained on this forlorn planet in the holiest and most admirable Sacrament of the altar, and now you come to me and you closely unite yourself to me under the appearance of food... Now your Blood flows in my blood; you Soul, O God incarnate,

permeates my soul, giving it strength and nourishment... What wonders! Who would venture to think this could be possible?

Refrain

What else could you have given me, O God, after offering yourself to me as something of my own property?... Your Heart, burning with love for me, suggested to you even another gift; still one more gift!... You told us to become like children, if we wish to enter the kingdom of heaven (cf. Mt 18:3). You very well know that a child needs its mother: you yourself have established this law of love. Therefore, your goodness and mercy have created for us a Mother, the personification of your infinite goodness and love; and from the cross on Golgotha, you presented her to us, and us to her... Besides, O loving God, you have decided to make her the all-powerful dispenser and mediatrix of your graces: you deny nothing to her, but neither is she capable of denying anything to anyone...Then who will not be able to reach heaven?

Refrain

G. «Look to the rock from which you were hewn, ... from which you were quarried» (Is 51:1). Maximilian Kolbe must have contemplated frequently and faithfully the human and spiritual experience of his Father, St. Francis, so as to become - as it was said - «the St. Francis of the XX century.» From Francis, therefore, Maximilian Kolbe learned a strong, profound, and filial love to the Mother of God. Maximilian's special insight, his ability to look within the events and history of his Franciscan Order, brought him to a clear and luminous intuition: the love to the Immaculata is not a noble addition to the Franciscan spirituality. Love to the Immaculata is «the golden thread» that connects the various generations of Franciscans and «the truth to be sown in the hearts of everyone who lives today of those who will live until the end of time» (cf. KW 486).

L. Hail, holy Lady, most holy Queen,
Mary, Mother of God, ever Virgin;
Chosen by the Most Holy Father in heaven,
Consecrated by Him,
With his Most Holy beloved Son,
And the Holy Spirit, the Comforter.
On you descended and in you still remains
All the fullness of grace
And every good.

Hail, his Palace. Hail, his Tabernacle.
Hail, his Robe. Hail, his Handmaid.
Hail, his Mother.

And hail, all holy Virtues, who, by the grace
And inspiration of the Holy Spirit,
Are poured into the hearts of the faithful
So that, faithless no longer,
They may be made faithful servants of God through you.
(*Salutation of the Blessed Virgin - Prayer of St. Francis*)

FROM THE WRITINGS OF ST. MAXIMILIAN KOLBE (KW 1210)

- L. The Immaculata is our ideal. To draw closer to her, to become similar to her, to allow her to take possession of our hearts and of our entire beings, to let her to live and work in us and through us, to let her love God with our own hearts, and to belong to her without reserve: this is our ideal!

Refrain

- L. We must radiate in the midst of our surroundings, win souls for her, so that souls might open to her, that she might rule within them all, everywhere in the world, without regard to various races, nationalities, languages, as well as in the hearts of all who will be on earth until the end of time - such is our ideal.

Refrain

- L. And that her life would be deepened in us day by day, hour upon hour, moment after moment, and that without limit -such is our ideal. And that her life would similarly unfold in each and every soul, that is or will ever be - such is our ideal!

Refrain

- G. St. Maximilian's self-offering in the concentration camp, in order to save a father of a family's life, was not an isolated action, rather it was the coronation of his entire life trained in self-giving, the natural consequence of his priesthood and of his whole life spent under Mary's maternal gaze.

FROM ONE OF ST. MAXIMILIAN'S LETTERS TO HIS MOTHER (KW 961)

- L. June 15, 1941

My beloved Mom,

... Everything is going well with me. Beloved Mom, don't worry about me or about my health, because the good God is everywhere and with immense love he thinks about all of us and about everything.

It is better not to write to me here, because I don't know how long I will be staying. Cordial greetings and kisses. Raymond Kolbe.

- G. Head shaved and dressed in striped rags, Kolbe became number 16670, but everyone knew that he was a priest. He was detailed to all sorts of work, exhausting and sometimes sinister. In this camp, populated with shadows in the fog, Kolbe lived his imprisonment like a special mission, his only concern that he might be unworthy of it. The captives were prisoners of the reigning terror and of the insurmountable obstacles that separated them from the world. Number 16670 was the only one to move unfettered in that prison. He alone was free (cf. *Forget not Love*, by André Frossard).

- L. Summer 1941

July was coming to an end. One evening, one of the prisoners of Block 14 didn't respond to the roll call. He had escaped. The Nazi guards began a careful search while the prisoners of the same Block were frightened. They cursed and prayed, and hoped he would be caught. They knew that if the escapee would not be found ten or more of them would die in reprisal...

The following evening, in fact, the SS-Fritzsch announced that the fugitive had not been found: therefore, ten men from Block 14 would be chosen to die naked, without food or drink, in the starvation bunker. As the selection began, one by one the ten condemned men stepped out of the ranks. One of the victims began to cry: «My wife and my children!» Everyone looked at him. Kolbe too looked at him, and decided at once. Peacefully and calmly, he stepped out of the ranks and approached the commander, who had just personally selected the victims... The SS guards raised their automatic rifles. But they were astonished: no one had ever dared to break the ranks.

Father Kolbe, his cap in his hands (a wonderful act of humility), pointing out to Francis Gajowniczek, spoke to the officer, «I wish to die in place of that prisoner....» Fritzsch, stupefied and dismayed, asked him, «Why?...» «I have no wife or children. I'm old and not good for anything....» Old, weak, useless: three good reasons to be killed.

«Who are you?»

«A Catholic priest.» This too was a good reason to be killed. «Request granted.»

Refrain

- L.** Ten men took off their wooden-shoes and bare-foot walked to their last journey. From that day they did not receive any food. Father Kolbe was always serene; he did not ask for anything, he did not complain. He only sought to encourage the other condemned. Two weeks went by. On August 14, 1941, Maximilian Kolbe died with an injection of carbolic acid. It was the eve of the Assumption of Our Lady into heaven.

Refrain

- G.** That is how Maximilian Kolbe died and with him the very pure child who had so loved the Virgin Mary. That is how the enthusiastic young priest who had written in his diary the resolution to give himself to others to the point of the supreme sacrifice died. That is how the prisoner who had once wished that his dust be dispersed by the wind died. By the eve of the Assumption he would be no more than ashes in the maw of the crematorium. Thus ended, in silence and abandonment, that life of which there remains nothing, but love

- P.** Let us pray.
O God of salvation, in Mary you fulfilled the expectations and hopes of humanity. Grant that our generation, enlightened by the example of St. Maximilian, may contribute to build up the new civilization of love by the power of your Spirit. We ask this through Christ Our Lord.

- A.** **Amen.**

FINAL BLESSING

- P.** May the Lord bless and protect you.

- A.** **Amen.**

- P.** May he show you his face and grant you his mercy.

A. Amen.

P. May he turn his gaze toward you and give you his peace.

A. Amen.

P. And may the blessing of the Almighty God, the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, descend upon you and with you remain forever.

A. Amen.

Our celebration should not end here: it should continue in our life. To celebrate the memory of St. Maximilian Kolbe, means to celebrate the love of God who, in Christ Jesus, has visibly entered our time and history. St. Maximilian Kolbe, in fact, is a martyr of charity, because, like Christ, he fulfilled the commandment of love: «Love... as I have loved you.» Everyone who looks to St. Maximilian Kolbe... see Christ! But it is not enough to stop and look. Today, once again, Maximilian Kolbe tells us, «Forget not love!». In order not to lose the meaning of these words, we will learn, every day, to welcome Mary as our «incredible companion» along the journey of our life.

CLOSING SONG