

cacy and strength. Someone who will stoop with dignity, be strong without harshness, that combination so difficult to achieve.

To this ideal you have vowed yourself. Afraid of nothing yet gentle and flexible. Our life has its own rigid principles yet omits no one from the width of the heart.

The immense dignity of Mary is the reflection of her Son as in a mirror—radiant as he was. He was the Man of Sorrows, the strong man who could drive the buyers from the Temple with a scourge yet stoop to speak so exquisitely of the lilies and the sparrows. Calm—strong—tender—an example his Mother follows in all things. 'Tower of Ivory.' Her sympathy knows no limit. Hold steadily to her then you need fear nothing—can risk all—unafraid. Dangers we must have everywhere in life, it were dreadful to dodge and try to escape them. Through her you will reach him. She 'Mirror of Justice'—he the perfect thing.

Bid her pray for you under this invocation. Beg something too of that frail, delicate fragility, something too of her unquenchable spirit of strength.



OUR LADY'S FOOL¹

BY

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It takes a wise man to make a fool.—Old Proverb.

HIS story reminds one of the finest pages of the Golden Legend; and like the lives of so many saints, is hardly credible. Modern man, used to psychological and other methods, may find it offensive: might we call it a challenge to human reason? Where shall we draw the line between the marvellous and the absurd? Certainly we prefer stories that we can measure against our own limited standard. But, God is not logic. He is not (so St Teresa says) even reasonable. And the saint, every saint, always remains unfathomed—a sort of walking scandal, a challenge hurled at reason, a wager. The Creator's imagination infinitely surpasses the cleverest of those who ape him, romancers and poets, and the improbable is the natural habitat of his masterpieces, the Saints. That is why they bewilder us and lay hold of us: does it not

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prove, in a tangible way, that man is made to surpass himself and that true sanctity scorns to be stereotyped?

Raymund Kolbe was the son of a working man in the neighbourhood of Lodz. His father was a weaver, his mother a midwife. She had been intending to enter a convent when her future husband made her a proposal of marriage. She considered it, then said 'Yes', provided that 'we always live according to the law of God'. The beginnings were hard, babies followed each other quickly.

Raymund was born in 1894. He had four brothers. In the home, behind a cupboard, there was a little chapel, as is customary in Poland in working-class families. Our Lady of Czestochowa was in the place of honour on the Altar, which was arranged with great love and without much taste; paper flowers were the fashion. Little Raymund often went behind the cupboard and spent long minutes there. He prayed—and he shed tears. This attracted his mother's attention. She questioned him: 'It is a great secret, Mamma.' So she explained to him that a good little boy never has secrets from his mother. He was obliged to own up. Raymund admitted that one day our Lady had appeared to him offering him two crowns: one white and one red. 'Would you like both of these?' And the little one answered, 'Yes, I want them both'. When he thought of this occurrence he could not help crying.

Certainly he was no dreamer and no booby. Clever with his hands, very gifted, vigorous, headstrong and quickwitted, he did not seem at all destined for the priesthood like his brother Francis who was such a gentle character. It was agreed that he should follow in his father's footsteps. His parents had succeeded in opening a small shop and soon it was decided that the boy, excellent at figures, was cut out for business. So Francis was to enter the seminary. Raymund gave up his studies, helped his parents and said nothing.

Fortunately, the local chemist took an interest in him and gave him some lessons. Raymund successfully passed the third grade examinations in the commercial school. Then there was a mission in the town, preached by Franciscans from Lwow. Raymund's parents were Franciscan tertiaries. When they heard that the Fathers received pupils in the little seminary, they decided to entrust Francis to them. Raymund prayed and said nothing. Did his mother guess his secret dream, she who was so upright and sincere? Anyway at the last minute his parents let him go with Francis. And it was no small sacrifice on their part.

At this time Raymund was not yet a saint. The life of the cloister came hard to him. When it came to deciding his future, his vocation, he hesitated. The vow of obedience, as St Francis con-

ceived it, frightened him, his nature craved for freedom. Poverty had no attraction for him. . . . As to chastity, long ago he had promised that to the 'Lady of his heart', the Blessed Virgin. But couldn't he keep that in the world? He had just decided to leave the monastery when he was called to the parlour.

His mother had come with great news. It was this: her third son (two had died young) had just entered religion. As a mother she was no longer wanted! All her girlhood's dreams had revived. After mature consideration both she and her husband had decided to consecrate the rest of their lives to God. They had just sold the shop. She was entering with the Benedictines, he was going to the Franciscans at Cracow. She had come to say goodbye to her favourite son.

This was a thunderbolt. Without knowing it, Raymund's mother had just saved his vocation. 'My eyes were opened and I understood', he admitted later. Instead of announcing his departure, he went to the Father Provincial to ask for admission. He received in religion the name of Maximilian.

Two years later his superiors sent this gifted novice to Rome. At the Gregorian he brilliantly took his doctorate in philosophy and then in theology. But it was the spiritual life that interested him most. He read with enthusiasm the life of the 'little' Teresa, not yet canonised, and that of Blessed Cottolengo. They were his two masters. Teresa taught him her 'little way', all confidence and abandonment in 'merciful love'. Joseph Cottolengo inspired him with his holy audacity in impossible enterprises. But the Blessed Virgin surpassed all the other saints. She was his beloved, his queen and his mistress. He vowed to her for ever his heart craving for love. And as to love has always meant to serve, Brother Maximilian wondered how he could *prove* to his Lady the passionate devotion that filled his heart.

Brother Maximilian had a practical genius that went straight to the mark. His ambitions were unbounded for his love was unlimited. He decided to give nothing more nor less than the Universe to his 'Immaculate One', the universal Mediatrix and the all-powerful operative of the royalty of Christ. . . .

Son of a warlike race, Maximilian spontaneously uses military language. He is of a conquering race. . . . He insists: 'We shall not cease until we have put the whole world at the feet of our Queen'. To fight we need weapons. But what weapons? We are in the middle of a world war, Europe is bathed in blood. Brother Maximilian is in Rome, exempt from military service for he is tubercular! Nevertheless, he takes no care of himself. At the age of twenty he

has only one lung. Wasted with fever, always exhausted, he goes ahead. No illness could get the better of his indomitable nature. He is in Rome at the heart of the world, he can pray. And his Queen reveals to him with what weapons he can advance from victory to victory. 'Napoleon', they say, 'one day declared that to win a war three things were needed: money, more money, and still more money.' Now to gain sanctity, heaven and earth, three things are required: To pray, to pray more, and to pray more still. *All depends on the quality of our prayer.* Now, according to Father Kolbe, it is sacrifice that gives prayer its quality, sacrifice and penance.

No sooner said than done. Father Maximilian, who has just been ordained priest, 'mobilises' six other 'fools like himself', two Poles and four Italians, and founds with them the 'Militia of Mary Immaculate' which, contrary to all reasonable predictions, is very soon approved by the Church.

At the end of the war Father Maximilian returned to Cracow. His health seemed hopeless. Frequent haemorrhages threatened a fatal catastrophe. Specialists declared he would not pull through. They sent him to Zakopane to a sanatorium where he spent his days in an invalid chair and had plenty of time for prayer. One fine day, quite unexpectedly, the dying man turned up again at Cracow and told his superiors that he wanted to publish a review. There was a general hue and cry. They all declared that Father Kolbe was mad. He was quite bitterly persecuted. The Father never liked to refer to it. But he often warned his collaborators, citing the example of Grignon de Montfort. 'It is enough', he said, 'to vow yourself to Mary for the whole of hell to fall on your back. Look at Bl. Grignon de Montfort (he was not 'saint' at that time): his own bishop turned him out of his diocese; his brother, a good Dominican, would not even speak to him, and his own near relatives persecuted him the most. The devil often makes use of good men to try us! I know someone who has been made to look all colours. They said: "You exaggerate", "You are compromising God's cause", "You are mad", and I know not what else! All this from would-be defenders of God! This is quite normal when the work is God's work, it is bound to be persecuted, even by good people: never let it scandalise you!' Not for anything in the world would Father Maximilian ever have gone against holy obedience. Reluctantly, sullenly, hardly knowing why, after long resistance, his superior allowed him to publish 'his' review, but on the condition that he took it all on himself.

Then Father Maximilian began begging.

This cost him enormously, as he acknowledged. Three times he

turned back before knocking at the first door. But he overcame himself. Red with shame, he asked for money for his review—so far unborn. All depended on his first humiliation. Thus in the lives of the saints there are some unsuspected hurdles that have to be jumped (as at the races) to be able to advance. And lives that mark time without advancing are nearly always fundamentally lacking in courage.

The new review had a sonorous title, 'The Knight of Mary Immaculate'. The poor Father had no helpers. He was no great writer himself. He had to fill the first numbers almost alone. And when it came to paying for the printing, he had not a halfpenny.

His Provincial shrugged his shoulders: just what he had foreseen! 'That's where these absurd ideas will land you. You see what it is, my child, to attack the moon with a spade (a Polish proverb). And now it is up to you to extricate yourself without compromising the friary.'

The poor Father, at bay, went to complain to his Queen. And behold, after Mass he found quite simply on the altar an envelope with just the money needed to pay for the printing and these words. 'For my dear little Mother Immaculate'. He took the envelope to Father Provincial. A Chapter was called and it was decided that, considering the exceptional circumstances of the gift, Father Maximilian might make use of it.

Meanwhile the printers at Cracow had come out on strike. Father Maximilian got permission, no one knows how, to go and publish his review at the other end of Poland, at Grodno. But things did not run too easily there either. Printing cost a lot, the review brought in practically nothing. Father Maximilian decided to buy a printing machine.

There was strong opposition. Some took scandal. And what, if you please, of holy poverty? It was not the duty of a religious to amuse himself manufacturing reviews. When one is penniless one does not aim so high. Go on producing your cabbage-leaf but, Father, only on condition that you are not missing from the confessional, nor from the work of the house, nor from the Divine Office. You are not free to waste your time.

When a storm was in progress Father Kolbe bent his head and let it pass by. He had the patience of the strong, acquired in a hard school and proof against every trial. He remained absolutely calm. 'It is for her', he used to say to himself, 'and she can do all things. Should the work fail it is because it was against her wish. If she wants it, it will hold good in spite of everything. And so, Madame, it is for you to unravel it all; I have only to obey.'

And at the last minute, always *in extremis*, the authorisations always arrived.

They were preceded by 'signs' which ended in convincing superiors. For instance, quite unexpectedly he received a cheque for a hundred dollars (an immense sum at that time) and Sister Faustina, the zealous apostle of Infinite Mercy, procured for him a second-hand printing machine.

They set to work. They had to turn the machine with all their might. Sixty thousand turns to print five thousand copies of the review. The whole 'committee of editors' consisting of three persons, sweated from morning till night. They were the entire staff; there was no one else for the management, packing, despatch. They worked all day and often spent the night at it. And then readers began to clamour for more copies. What was to be done? Father Kolbe was not a man for an expedient nor for half-measures. He decided to buy the latest thing in linotypes.

This was a new proof of the good Father's 'folly', also of his pride, also of his lack of the spirit of poverty. It rained critics but they let him go on. We do not know exactly where Father Kolbe got the money. The friary naturally did not give a farthing. Soon after the storm mysterious packing cases appeared at the Grodno railway station; they were the famous machines imported from abroad which caused an immediate sensation; in the memory of man nothing like them had been seen, so perfect and so complicated! One hardly knew how to set to work on them. And 'chance' ordained that at this precise juncture a young mechanic, a specialist at the work, presented himself and asked admission into the little community.

These 'working brothers' caused poor Father Maximilian much trouble and many tears! It was unthinkable that the Blessed Virgin should be served for money. A vocation was needed and a true one: an entire and absolute gift into the hands of Mary Immaculate.

Now it was not that such vocations were wanting, on the contrary. But it upset the framework of the friary, risked provoking an economic crisis. Prudence demanded a certain relation between the 'Fathers' and the 'Laybrothers'. And then, too, everyone should keep his place. Has there ever been a Brother as foreman? as responsible agent; as editor of a review?—it is turning the world inside out! And then it is all very fine to admit them: but what of the future? 'And if you fail, my dear Father, what shall we do with them when they are old and unable to work?'

Father Maximilian bent his back—and held on. He was only following the example of his founder, St Francis of Assisi, 'the

little brother'! It is very good to work, neither could St Francis endure. 'brothers like flies' who live on the toil of others, but when one is working for Mary Immaculate one should be *dedicated*.

No one ever watched more jealously over the priority of the spiritual side than this giant producer: it was the secret of his incredible triumphs. His review was no commercial enterprise. Vowed exclusively to the glory of God, through the mediation of Mary Immaculate, it could only make use of supernatural methods, of sanctified instruments. And this did not in any way prevent the highest technical competence.

Father Maximilian had a very definite idea of holy poverty. It might be summed up in this watchword: *nothing* for ourselves, *all* for Mary Immaculate. For ourselves destitution, coarse food, wretched hovels, patched clothes. For her model workshops, most perfect machines, all the latest technical products, rapid transport. Father Maximilian would have liked to offer his 'lady' all the first-fruits of human genius. In a few years time, from every corner of Poland, people will be flocking to him to admire his powerful machinery. At the moment this is but a beginning. But the orders went up by leaps and bounds: in 1924, 12,000 copies; in 1925, 30,000; in 1926, 45,000; in 1929, 142,000; in 1939, a million.

Let us return to 1927. Relations with the friary became more and more ticklish. It is true that Father Kolbe paid scrupulously and generously for the maintenance of all his Brothers; but their numbers became terrifying. No one understood his idea, which was one of genius, of wanting to breathe into the most technical work a soul and a passionate ideal, of sanctifying the workshop, the machinery, the most humble or complicated business, of turning the very tools into a canticle of glory. No one, it seems, knew how to appreciate and sanctify the discoveries of human genius as he did; he used to speak of his 'sister' the machinery and of his 'brother' the motor-power in the same tone of voice as St Francis did of the birds and flowers. . . .

It became very necessary to swarm. They put every obstacle in his way. The importance of the review required living nearer to the capital. Grodno was in an isolated situation, the distribution of the review and contacts with readers were difficult. At the most difficult moment the Father had a serious relapse and his superiors sent him for several months to Zakopane with a formal prohibition to think about the review during that time. Father Maximilian obeyed to the letter. He did not think about the review, but he multiplied his parleys with the Lady of his heart. At his return things went without difficulty.

First of all someone offered him a plot of land not far from Warsaw in exchange for Gregorian Masses. The windfall was an unheard of thing, but the friary, when asked, refused it. Happily the Father knew just how to beguile the proprietor of the ground so that finally he offered it to him for nothing. There were several mysterious donations that facilitated the transfer. Superiors, astounded at this run of luck, offered no resistance. And the friary breathed freely to see this pack of fools depart.

Immediately they built wretched living quarters and beautiful workshops on this bit of land. Father Maximilian, faithful in this to the mind of St Francis, did not desire for his little brothers 'beautiful buildings' nor a 'convent'. Better spend the money on one more good machine. As for ourselves, what we need is simplicity and sacrifice, so that we can never forget that we are, here below, but *strangers* and *pilgrims*. And he added, as if inspired with a spirit of prophecy, 'Besides there will come a time when we shall congratulate ourselves on being so poor because our living quarters are so devoid of comfort that they will not requisition them'.

There was a time when the 'little Brothers' went two and two to announce to the world good tidings. Today they profit by the services of 'our sister the machine' to send them forth to the four winds in numberless printed texts. Every epoch has its methods. Father Maximilian joyfully gathered up all the latest inventions and made use of them at once. He had dreams of an air-mail as the usual form of transport and established at Niepokalanow a postal circulation which was functioning very well at the beginning of the war. And he wanted to mobilise the best film actors to produce some Catholic films.

This work and these immense schemes should have satisfied him. But no, they did not suffice for him. We should quite misunderstand Father Maximilian if we thought he had forgotten his vow as a fervent novice, 'to give the entire world to Christ through the mediation of Mary Immaculate'. But he was dreaming of another thing too: of the red crown that had been promised him one day. At present there was no hope of finding it in Europe. Father Maximilian, as St Francis had done of old, turned towards the East, thirsting for martyrdom.

One day his amazed superiors heard some astounding news: Father Maximilian wanted to go to Japan to found there a Japanese *Knight of Mary Immaculate*! 'Have you any money?'—'No.'—'Do you know Japanese?'—'No.'—'At least you have friends there, some sort of support?'—'Not yet, but I shall find some, by the grace of our Lady.'

The fact was that one day, as he returned to Zakopane, Father Kolbe had met some Japanese students in the train. They got talking, the Father offered them a miraculous medal (that was his 'grapeshot'), in exchange they gave him some little wooden elephants that they used as fetishes. Since then he had never ceased thinking of the pitiable plight of these godless souls.

As usual, after long resistance his superiors gave him the desired permissions. How stand up against his arguments? At the end of one hour's discussion he had always gained his cause. It is thus that we, who are niggardly and stiff in the joints, suddenly open our hearts when we come in contact with a saint: he only tells us what we have always known but how is it that we have never understood?

In mid-winter in 1930 five religious left for Japan. Father Kolbe had not forgotten that seventeenth-century Jesuit Adalbert Mecinski, contemporary of St Andrew Bobola, who went to Japan longing to die for the Faith and won his palm! Like this distant brother, our five missionaries were bound for Nagasaki.

They travelled across France, went to Lourdes and Lisieux. Always very reserved, Father Kolbe has left us hardly any details of his stay in Lourdes. We like to imagine him at the Grotto: 'Mary Immaculate can be felt there', he wrote. His letters are witty and playful. Obviously he wanted to amuse his 'little Brothers'. 'I have just seen the chessmen that belonged to St Teresa of Lisieux, this is to console our unrepentant players.' Sometimes he takes a more serious tone: 'Nothing distresses me more than the indifference of souls vowed to our Lady. Willingly would I give my life to sanctify them.' Or again, 'We are the Blessed Virgin's property, her chattels. She has all rights over us. We are her knights, ready to go wherever she says, to do whatever she tells us. . . .'

They embarked at Marseilles. On the boat and during the landings at ports, Father Maximilian made many conquests: his charm was irresistible. At Saigon he found time to contact the Annamite clergy and obtain their consent and promise of efficient help for the publication of a local *Knight of Mary Immaculate*. At Shanghai the Catholic millionaire Lo-Pang-Hong at once placed himself at his disposal, offering him all that was needful to publish a Chinese review. Unhappily, the plan miscarried for the missionaries opposed it. 'The town is divided', he wrote sadly, 'in spheres of influence. We can only act in the Franciscan zone. Pagans are very willing to help us, all the difficulties come from the Christians.'

They had to abandon China. Our missionaries arrived in Nagasaki

on 24th April, 1930. Entering the port, the boat coasted along the Islands where for three centuries traces of Christianity were maintained in spite of most cruel persecution. In their bamboo huts they had still kept their little statues of the Blessed Virgin 'Seibo', sometimes rather too similar to the goddess Kwanom. In 1930 there were at Nagasaki sixty thousand Catholics, one third of the converts of Japan. Being very observant Father Maximilian registered quickly and correctly all he wanted to know. As he went through the picturesque and swarming street of the town he often turned his gaze towards the 'martyrs' mount', where numberless Christians died for the Faith in the midst of most refined tortures.

Mgr Hayasaka, Bishop of Nagasaki, smiled on hearing the intentions of the missionaries who had arrived from distant 'Porando'. The plan for publishing a review seemed to him quite unreal. But when he learnt that Father Kolbe was a Doctor of Philosophy he asked him to teach in his seminary and promised in return not to oppose the publication, on condition that the Brothers carried it out by themselves.

They arrived on the 24th April. On the 24th May Father Maximilian sent a despatch to Niepokalanow, 'Today we are sending out our first number. We have a printing establishment. Glory be to Mary Immaculate! Maximilian.' After reading and re-reading this message the 'little Brothers' looked at each other amazed. For, up to that day, they had scarcely believed in it.

The Japanese beginnings were naturally difficult. They had to learn the language. 'I have a hard head and little time for study', wrote the Father. It was difficult to translate the title of the Review. An exact equivalent did not exist. They had to put 'without sin'. *Mugenzai No Seibo No Kishi*. They had to do all the technical work themselves. The machine was old and rusty. They had to turn with all their might. 'Our hands are all bleeding from the effort of folding up.' Father Kolbe wrote nearly all the articles in Italian. Japanese priests translated them tolerably well.

They lived in wretched quarters with a hole in the roof. 'Last night we had a snow-storm. It snowed on our heads, we had to cover up well to protect ourselves. This morning the dormitory was all white. . . .'

Father Maximilian is at the end of his strength. He is exhausted with headaches, fever never leaves him. His poor eyes are red with want of sleep. But he holds on and goes forward! In a letter at this epoch he outlines a project for other 'invasions'. 'As soon as our foundation is well established in Japan I shall go to make foundations in India and afterwards at Beyrouth for the Arabs. I am count-

ing on editing the review in Turkish, Persian, Arabic and Hebrew. And so the work of the Militia will attain to more than a thousand millions, half the inhabitants of the globe.' He had vision.

At the moment the distribution stands at 10,000 copies. Voluntary hawkers going about the country gather in more subscribers. Reception is sympathetic, sometimes enthusiastic. It is because Japan is dying of the spiritual void left to her by the abandonment of her ancestral faith for the benefit of an unbridled nationalism of foreign importation. Above all in intellectual circles uneasiness is growing. With his usual perspicacity Father Maximilian has immediately touched the nerve centre. The hunger of these souls must be satisfied, the discomfort of these hearts needs a doctor. The hour of the missionary has struck. 'What an abundant harvest awaits us!' he cries, 'provided we are truly Christians. What arrests these unhappy souls on the threshold of the Church is that so many among us are not living up to our faith, are betraying Christ instead of serving him.'

Contacts are set up, no one knows how. We have before us a photo inscribed: 'Father Maximilian among the Bonzes'. His emaciated and smiling face emerges from the midst of a group with inscrutable features. Were they drawn by curiosity or rather the irresistible attraction of sanctity? We have no documents to reconstruct this beautiful chapter of the Golden Legend. One thing is certain, that the Father spent long hours with his 'dear pagans'.

Abruptly he was called to the General Chapter which was due to take place at Lwow. Obedient as ever, he set out feeling deadly. That was because there was no one capable of keeping the gigantic work going in his absence. On his return, three months later, he ascertained the damage. They were bordering on bankruptcy. It was a month since the last number of the review had appeared. . . .

His presence saved everything. There was even new scope. At the General Chapter he had just got permission to found a branch establishment from Niepokalanow and to open a noviciate for the natives. A house must be built at once.

Father Maximilian bought land in the outskirts of Nagasaki, on a steep slope which goes down a long ridge, sloping away and sheltered from the town. Everyone criticised him. Had anyone ever seen building undertaken like that? Why turn your back on the town? The Father smiled but was obstinate. After the cataclysm of the atomic bomb 'Mugenzai-no-Sono', the Japanese 'Niepokalanow', remained almost intact because it was sheltered by the ridge. The windows blew out and that was all. No one perished in the convent precincts.

Of course they had to build it all themselves. This was a difficult stage. Unfortunately Father Kolbe had hardly any fellow-workers of his own stature and enthusiasm. Many were discouraged. Many were homesick, asking to return. Many were very willing to be missionaries, but somewhere else. We must admit that Father Maximilian did wonders, but nothing went easily for him and every day of his life was a hard crucible for his faith: was he not nearly all the time 'hoping against hope?' The heart-rending correspondence of these years should be read, where the Father, without a shadow of bitterness relates the denials, the treasons, the cowardice of unfaithful Brothers.

Happily there were plenty of others. God's works produce wonderful selections. For one who deserted, two others would present themselves. Opposed to so much cowardice was the silent barrage of sheer heroism. But over against everything the house is built, is functioning. If only the 'unfaithful Brothers' were all! The saddest resistance comes from missionaries of other 'zones', the clergy, who show total misunderstanding, yielding in the end before manifest success! The Bishop of the place accuses them of slackness, denounces him for making a foundation without authorisation. It is clear they are out to make opposition. He has to vindicate himself, explain, practise infinite patience. Father Maximilian always gains his cause, but God alone knows what these proceedings cost him.

Letting nothing hinder him, Father Maximilian embarks for a foundation in India in 1932, two years after the Japanese foundation. He is more ill than ever before, for some time he has been suffering from a painful abscess on the nape of the neck. 'I think', he writes during the voyage, 'that the Blessed Virgin gives to each one of us as many and as great graces as are necessary to carry out her plans. Consequently— but I must not let my pen run away with me. What I believe is that in every country a local 'Niepokalanow' is to be formed, using all the productions of modern technique, for the most beautiful inventions are meant to serve her first of all.'

Putting in at Singapore, Father Kolbe again takes up the project of a Malayan review. Arrived at Ceylon he betakes himself to Ernakulam, where the Catholic Archbishop resides. His reception is cold and distrustful. What does this stranger want of us? The Father turns to prayer. He calls upon his little Saint. Had he not agreed with her formerly in Rome that every day he would pray for her canonisation and in return she would be the patron of his works? Standing before a statue of Teresa in a corridor of his Archbishop's house the Father says to her: 'We shall see now' if

you remember'. 'At that moment', he adds, 'a flower fell at my feet, it was like a rose. It had quite simply detached itself from a vase of flowers at the foot of the statue. I was rather impressed by it. I said to myself: We shall see what that signifies.'

All Father Maximilian's correspondence is of this transparent simplicity. And he spoke as he wrote, going straight to the point, saying all he thought very exactly. This brought him some enemies and some misunderstanding. He had the soul of a child, incapable of rancour or bitterness. The supernatural was to such a point his natural habitat that it was embarrassing. One could not get accustomed to his way of speaking about saints or the Blessed Virgin. He treated them as living persons, present, on a level. This great realist was not of this earth and perhaps it was that that gave him such wonderful mastery of people and things. He ruled them from above even as he treated them as 'brothers'. St Francis would not have disowned his praises of 'brother motor'. 'What shall I wish for him', he wrote, 'except to serve our Queen and Mistress faithfully. Today we bless it and that is its clothing day. Then we shall adjust it, that will be its noviceship, and when we set it going it will make profession. What else can I desire for it? That it works for a long time? That it will have many companions? That it will be efficient? Well, no, I will wish it nothing more. Whatever it does, only one thing matters: that it carries out blindly our Lady's wishes. A good religious is not 'good' because he gets a lot done, but because he obeys. And so Brother Motor will be a good religious if he accomplishes, through the intermediary of the Brother Mechanic, all that the Blessed Virgin asks of him. If she wishes it, let him get out of order tomorrow; if she wills it, let him work a hundred years and gain the wherewithal to procure for us other Brother Motors. . . . Is not this the language of the *Fioretti*?

Again Father Maximilian said: 'We should be a docile instrument in the hands of our Lady, like a pen in a writer's hand, like a chisel in the hand of a sculptor, so that she can make with us whatever she wills. And this with no restrictions. If we are told today to go on foot to Madrid or to Moscow, so much the better! The slightest "but" would be too much. If the Blessed Virgin willed that all our work should crumble and fall to pieces, we should not lift a finger to maintain it.'

This supernatural spirit is the key to all Father Maximilian's incredible triumphs. He went ahead and let others do as they liked. He did all he could, the rest was his 'Lady's' affair. Under such conditions, what was there to worry about? Does not faith move mountains?

Little St Teresa kept her bargain. All the difficulties with Ceylon local authorities smoothed out little by little. But then another complication arose: volunteers were not forthcoming. The poor Father had not enough collaborators. He decided to return to Japan and prepare for the expedition.

In 1933 we find him in Rome again. They wanted to make him a Bishop but his superiors opposed it. In 1934 he built a beautiful church at Mugenzai-No-Sono and the review reached an edition of 65,000. All this cost him some serious haemorrhages and frequent spitting of blood. In 1936 he left for Poland with his health completely shattered and at the General Chapter he was elected Guardian of Niepokalanow.

It was an end to his lovely dreams of martyrdom! An end to his missions! It seemed madness to leave works hardly founded, in full swing, and that had need of him! But was not this the time for heroic obedience? And was there not plenty to do on the spot? The time that remained, the precious time must be utilised to the full. The three years that precede the war show dizzy soaring. The Father surpasses himself. We recognise a new note with him: the presentiment of the approaching catastrophe—and of his own end. Like a miser, he scrapes together every minute.

The weekly printing attains one million copies. At the same time Father Kolbe begins the publication in Latin of *Miles Immaculatae*, which will rally the clergy of all races and tongues. 'It is our world printing agency', he said. At the same time *The Little Paper*, recently launched, became the most popular newspaper in Poland. Very well produced, very cheap, small size, our Lady's colours (blue and white), from the first it stood in the front rank of the large Polish press. With unimaginable fury the managers saw their business numbers visibly melting. 'Commercial enterprise' could not hold its own in competition with this humble newspaper that went straight to the people's heart. Propaganda and editorials had a very small place in it and even to this day one wonders how it was able to force its way. Only the voluntary hawkers could claim a large part of the triumph: didn't they bawl out at all the cross-roads, to sell their paper to the passers-by? and that at the ridiculous sum of five 'gros' (about a halfpenny before the war, a record price, other papers costing 10 to 25 gros). 'They have a good chance', cried distinguished editors with rage, 'since they get all the workmanship for nothing.' And Father Kolbe made the smiling reply, 'Well, why don't you do the same as we do, then?'

The Little Paper made for wholesome morals, fought against obscene writing, declared merciless war on all forms of abuse. It

was the paper of humble people, peasants, workmen. They saw themselves there, they felt they were understood, defended. And then the Blessed Virgin was there, the patron of the enterprise, that every Pole loves with a fervent and faithful love. 'Truly', someone once said, full of bitterness, 'Father Kolbe struck a good advertising dodge, setting himself up with the Virgin.' . . .

In 1938 *The Little Paper* reached an edition of 320,000 copies; an enormous number for Poland.

The wonderful way all these works soared can only be explained by the 'supernatural capital' put into the foundation. Admirable realist, outstanding business man, Father Maximilian never fell into the snare of mere activism, that plague of Catholic works, and there is the secret of his irresistible charm. This man who never allowed himself a moment's respite, jealously upheld the priority of the interior life, of prayer and purity of intention. All his spiritual doctrine was reduced to a few simple rules. 'She herself', he would say to his little Brothers, 'She herself must form us, train us, sanctify us. Our only rôle is to let her do it, to obey her good pleasure blindly. All the philosophy of Niepokalanow lies in that.' And again, 'We are not aiming at making ourselves known, to write or get anything written about ourselves. Even Niepokalanow must not be our aim. What alone matters is our interior life: we should become every day more the property of the Blessed Virgin, her serving Knights. Never forget that our exterior activity can only be an outward expression of what we are within, an overflowing surplus.'

Father Maximilian was a matchless educator. His genius knew how to make the hardened crust of conventual life more elastic. The lay-brother was promoted to a rôle of the first rank, so far reserved to 'the Fathers' and to which his profession and total gift of himself without reserve to Mary Immaculate, the indispensable condition of admission to Niepokalanow, gave him a right. In doing this Father Maximilian was tracing back to its source and turning to account the express wish of the Founder whose 'democratic' ideas had been a revolution in their time. More than one trait, besides that, brought him near to the Poverello: his love of holy poverty, blind obedience, desire of martyrdom, and above all his immense overflowing charity. It was his charity that gained him all hearts. He knew how to love his 'little children', the Brothers of Niepokalanow. We have before us several photos showing him with a group of them; they are listening, drinking in every word of his. They crowd round him, like chicks round a mother hen! He showed them exquisite little kindnesses. He, who was always overflowing with work, could yet write long letters of six

pages every day to one who suffered from scruples. They could always knock at his door, even at night. With what love he gathered up his 'little stray sheep', his prodigal sons! Was it surprising that vocations became numerous? In the service of Mary Immaculate he would not take on 'mere hands', but that question never arose, for as the work grew so 'knights' flocked in.

We come to 1939. Heavy clouds are gathering over Europe. All who knew him assert that Father Maximilian knew more than he ever divulged. Sometimes, in his conferences, certain revealing words escaped him. They could very easily see that, very gently, he wanted to prepare his little company—for martyrdom. One Brother took notes during one of his conferences in March 1938. This is what he said word for word: 'A cruel conflict is in preparation. We do not know yet where it will stop. Here in Poland we must expect the worst. During the first three centuries the Church suffered persecution: the blood of the Martyrs was the seed of Christians. Later, when the persecutions ceased, one of the Fathers of the Church deplored the lukewarmness of Christians. He rejoiced to see persecutions break out again. We should do the same, we should rejoice at what is going to happen, for in the midst of difficulties our zeal will increase and we shall better understand the necessity of prayer and penance. Besides, are we not in the hands of the Blessed Virgin? In our last talk we said well, as between Brothers, that the ideal that we most ardently desired was to give our lives for Mary Immaculate. We live only once, we die only once: provided that it be according to her good pleasure.'

In September 1939 the *blitzkrieg* burst over Poland. Squadrons of Junkers plough the sky like immense vultures. Bombardments succeed each other night and day without respite. Every communiqué announces the enemy's advance. Soon the front is close to Niepokalanow. Of the seven hundred evacuated Brothers there remain only fifty in charge of the infirmary. At their head, imperious and smiling is Father Kolbe. The wounded come in in great numbers. Everything has to be improvised. He himself is ready for everything. Never has he been so fully a father and leader as he is in these terrible days. His very presence was healing.

On 19th September the first Germans appear on motor-cycles. One of them shouts: *Alle raus!* (all turn out!). The religious are gathered together, orders are given to vacate the place immediately, except two who can stay in the infirmary: the Brother infirmarian—who will be the other? 'Father, stay', cried a pleading voice. 'No, my child', said Father Kolbe gently, 'Brother Cyriaque will be much more useful.' So he left with the group.

They cram them into trucks. On the 21st September they land at the Amfitz camp.

We need not lay stress, alas! on what the German camps were like. Ill-treatment, torments of all kinds, horrible crowding, hunger and cold. Very soon the 'little Brothers' are asking themselves how they are going to hold out. And Father Kolbe, ill himself, much more enfeebled than all the others, braces them up, incites them to pray, tells them to rejoice since the Blessed Virgin has sent them 'gratis' as missionaries to Germany. 'Just think, what a windfall!' And he begins distributing miraculous medals, of which he always has pocketfuls, even to the Germans.

His companions could not recover from their astonishment. What is the secret of this calmness and joy? Father Kolbe gave himself away one day when they gave him feast day greetings. 'I have been asking myself: what shall I give you for my feast? This: I wish you all to belong to the Blessed Virgin even more deeply, more every day. When suffering is far off we are ready for everything. But now when we are given the chance to suffer, let us profit by it to gain souls. Do let us try to gain as many souls as possible to the cause of Mary Immaculate.'

His hour had not yet come. The order of liberation comes on the feast of the Immaculate Conception. The Little Brothers, who were perhaps not longing for martyrdom, welcome it with unbounded joy. Father Maximilian alone looks thoughtful, even sad. This time again, 'She' has not wanted his sacrifice. And yet God knows how joyfully he had offered her his life. He felt spent, good for nothing. Would he just die in a tranquil, common way 'like everyone else'? Hadn't he got a right to make the supreme sacrifice?

The little group returns to Niepokalanow, despoiled but not requisitioned. The Germans despised such wretched quarters. Father Kolbe has more illusions. He thinks perhaps the Germans will let him publish his review just the same. Wonderful! He gets permission for one number. We read there, in an article written by his own hand: 'No one on earth can alter the truth. All we can do is to seek it, find it, recognise it and live up to it. . . .' Evidently this tone was displeasing to those in power at the time. No permission was given for a second number.

Father Kolbe is waiting. He knows very well that he will not survive this war. Before they were freed, at the Amfitz camp, he said one day to one of his companions: 'Let us make a bargain with Mary Immaculate. Let us say to her: "Sweetest Mother, I offer myself to thee through love to stay in this unpleasant camp,

although others go back home. I will stay here to suffer, to be forgotten, despised, alone. I give myself to thee to die on this wretched pallet, surrounded by hearts that are unfeeling and cold."

The Blessed Virgin heard her faithful knight. On the 17th February 1941 a black car stopped before the friary door. 'They are asking for Father Kolbe', the porter announces. He went to meet them. They stand face to face: this frail religious with a body wasted with illness and superhuman toil and three robust looking Germans. According to the Polish custom, he said to them: 'Praised be our Lord Jesus Christ!' They sneer: 'Are you Maximilian Kolbe?' Then—forward, move on!' He smiles, he is happy. This time it is true. It is all to the good.

He is taken at first to the prison at Pawaik. It is at its hardest stage. The Germans, before the invasion of Russia, liquidate all opposition. Every day thousands of Poles are shot.

Father Maximilian is in cell 103. It did not take him an hour to conquer all hearts. He listens to his companions' confidences, many of whom are condemned to death, he hears their confessions, prays with them, treats them like a mother with her children. One day the S.S. Group-leader entered the cell. At the sight of a religious habit he is seized with rage. With bloodshot eyes, foaming at the lips, he seizes Father Maximilian by his rosary, pulls him violently: 'Imbecile, idiot, coward, filthy priest, tell me if you believe in Jesus Christ?' 'Yes, I believe', cries the Father joyfully. A violent blow in the face. Father Maximilian bends double. He feels the salt taste of blood in his mouth.

'Well, do you still believe?'

'Oh yes, I believe.'

Another blow. Then another, accompanied with oaths. The poor Father's face becomes white, then purple. After each blow he gets up again with difficulty. But he continues to face it out.

'And now do you tell me you believe?'

'Yes, I do believe.'

The fury of the police officer knew no bounds. He struck with all his strength, closed fists. The Father falls down, then he kicks him about the floor with his boots. His haggard face no longer looks human. Finally, seeing that his victim is not moving, he runs off, slamming the door.

Hardly has he recovered consciousness than Father Maximilian is doing all he can to calm his companions. His face is terribly swollen, he speaks with difficulty: 'My friends, you should rejoice with me: it is for souls, for Mary Immaculate'.

On the 28th May loaded railway carriages stop at Oswiecim

station, better known as Auschwitz, the name given by the Germans, an extermination camp where more than a million condemned met their death amidst cruel tortures. Among the number were some unhappy souls who would die in rebellion and hatred. There were involuntary martyrs, eleventh hour labourers, suddenly become great by acceptance of the sacrifice. There were also those who were atoning, those who were paying, those who were profiting in this market of blood by offering their own, drop by drop, in a fully conscious holocaust. Father Kolbe was one of those.

Much has been written about the German concentration camps but there remain pages that will never be written on this earth. . . .

Hunger, continual, fierce hunger that prevents any sleep. Cold that causes shudders day and night. Continual tormenting, systematic degradation: crimes against human dignity no longer count, form part of a deliberately worked out programme among these outcasts. Priests are in the last rank. They are commonly called 'priest-swine'. They are given the hardest work, readily accompanied with horse-whippings. Humiliated, reduced to tatters, hunted out like wild animals by a hysterical hatred, 'priest-hatred', without meaning to, sometimes without knowing it, they bear witness, and their poor swollen, unrecognisable faces recall that Face covered with spittle.

Father Maximilian wills it all. Father Maximilian understands. In this hell he is one of the rare souls who are supremely free, for between his will and God's will for a long time there has been no division. Like St Andrew, like the Poor Man of Assisi, he greets the Cross as his beautiful bride. And he prepares himself for the wedding feast.

He forms part of the company called 'Babice'. It is the worst treated and it has for superintendent Krott, called 'the bloody'. This monster vows merciless hatred for Father Kolbe. With his companions the poor man has to carry at a quick trot (laufschrift!) great tree trunks, and each time he falls unable to do any more blows rain on his emaciated back. One day he tried in vain, he could not get up. Then Krott trampled him mercilessly with his big military boots, kicked him into a rut and left him for dead. In the evening his comrades brought him back, a mass of bleeding tatters. In the hospital, a hell where the sick die like flies, three or four on the same bed, without medical care, with no one to offer them a glass of water, Father Kolbe chose the worst place, quite near the door: 'In this way I see the dead carried out and I pray for them.' In spite of its being forbidden and the threats of punishment, the Father hears confessions the whole night long. His

slender rations he gives up to others: 'They are more hungry than I am'. In this hell he is always even-tempered, always gay and full of spirits, cheering the down-hearted, refuting the 'defeatists'. 'My little children, you must hold out, you *ought* to survive it all. Put your trust in the Blessed Virgin; she will help you, she will save you.'

Sometimes, at the risk of the lash, he preached real sermons before an audience of skeletons and dying men. Those of his group who escaped remember one Sunday when he spoke 'of the relations of Mary Immaculate with the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity', with so much fire, with such burning enthusiasm that profane men were enraptured by it. The fact is that besides his two doctorates, good Father Maximilian had received not a few diplomas in the University of the Holy Spirit, where alone one can learn 'the science of the Saints'.

We come to 30th July 1941. In block 14 where Father Kolbe is, a prisoner is missing: another escape! And the prisoners remember with terror the head officer's threat that for each fugitive twenty men of his block would be condemned to die of starvation.

That night no one in the barracks slept. These wretched men, broken down with most refined tortures, who often longed for death as for a release, were overcome with mortal fear. To die by the executioner's bullet, well and good: but to die of hunger is the most dreadful of all deaths. In the camp tales were told on this subject that froze the blood in their veins. Sometimes they heard howlings of wild animals coming from the casemate of torture. Father Kolbe comforts them and hears confessions. To a young boy trembling at his side he whispered: 'Are you afraid, my child? But death is nothing to be afraid of.'

The next morning at the roll-call the head of the camp announced that the fugitive had not been caught. He gave orders to disperse the ranks of all the blocks except block 14. Hours passed, mid-day came, then in the evening the men came back from work: block 14 was still there, standing at attention, awaiting the sentence.

The Camp Commandant Fritz stops before the ranks. His head looks like a bulldog's. He is obviously enjoying the terror of his victims. At last he began to call out (barked, one might say): 'The fugitive has not been found. Ten of you will die for him, in the hunger cell. Next time twenty will be condemned.'

He passes along the front rank, he looks each one in the face, seems to consider, then chooses: 'This one'. The man leaves the ranks. In the silence their hissing breaths sound like a moan: 'This one. And this one.' And then, 'That one'.

Ten of them. Ten condemned to death. One of them cries out in a stifled voice: 'My poor wife, my poor children!' Those remaining in the ranks breathe again.

Suddenly something unexpected happens. A prisoner leaves the ranks. How daring he is! His head is slightly to one side, his great eyes stare into the amazed face of Fritz. The officer seizes his revolver, steps back a pace, shouts out:

'Halt! What does this swine want?'

Father Maximilian stands before him. He speaks so quietly that his comrades in the front rank can hardly hear him.

'Will you allow me to die in the place of one of the condemned men?'

Fritz looks at him, dumbfounded. He is silent for quite a minute.

Then he asks:

'Who are you?'

'A Catholic priest.'

'Whose place do you want to take?'

'That one's.' Father Kolbe points to the man who had just complained.

'And what for?'

'Because I am old and useless. My life is no longer of any account, whilst he has a family.'

The Camp Commandant thinks for a minute, then makes a sign with his hand; it means yes. Father Maximilian joins the condemned men. For a brief moment there is profound silence. No one quite understands what has just happened. Father Maximilian is calm and radiant.

In the death block, kept to this day, there is a casemate where the condemned were locked up, naked. From this moment nothing more is given them to eat and what is much more dreadful, nothing to drink. They will stay there shut up until they die.

A martyrdom of hunger is nothing to a martyrdom of thirst. In condemning himself to die of hunger during his famous strikes, Gandhi stopped eating, but he did not stop drinking. Thirst dries up the intestines, makes the veins seem to be on fire, leads to madness. Up to this time the hunger cell (a miniature hell) resounded with the howlings of the condemned men.

But this time there is something different. The S.S. men are not pleased about it. In this hell the condemned men are praying and singing! Every day their voices become weaker, moans are heard, but they are not cries of despair. What is going on there?

On the 14th of August, a fortnight after their confinement, Father Maximilian was the sole survivor. The prison warder finished him

off with a carbolic injection. The gang of men sent to clean up found him sitting on the ground, his head leaning against the wall, 'his body clean and his face radiant'. 'To see him', continued the witness, 'you would easily take him for a saint. He seemed to radiate light. The other corpses were dirty, with their wasted forms stretched out on the ground. He seemed to be asleep—.'

Like all the rest, like many others too, his body was cremated. And already his ashes, scattered to the four winds of the spirit, are coming up as seeds of glory.

The work of Niepokalanow goes on.



THE SCALE

BY

CONRAD PEPLER, O.P.



O study of English medieval spirituality would be complete without a treatise on Walter Hilton. That is patently true. It is also clear that he should come at the conclusion of such a study for he is at once the most learned and the most analytical of all these writers. He is a man of wide experience both in his life of prayer and in his direction of contemplative religious, and he is a man who has studied in the Schools with greater patience than Rolle and with a tidier mind than the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*.

In the present series of articles we have followed these various medieval writers in an orderly progression not according to historical procedure but in relation to the development of the soul under grace as recorded by each writer. Langland was made to propose the ways and working of the first Conversion; the *Ancren Riwele* neatly described the Purgative Way; Richard Rolle was typical of the Illuminative Way; while *The Cloud* and Mother Julian were both, in different respects, seen to be speaking of the Unitive Way. Consequently Walter Hilton who is the only one among them to set down with the precision of the theologian the whole way of progress to union, would seem to claim the last word as presenting a complete summary, foreshadowing the consummate skill of St John of the Cross in describing the Christian's ascent to perfect union with God in the divine nuptials.

Hilton's date places him, not at the end of the spiritual movement in England, but rather in the middle of its progress when