



# Director's Letter No. 2

by Fr. Karl Stehlin, Director of the Militia Immaculatae

The 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of death of St. Maximilian, August 2016

*Dear Knights of the Immaculata!*

On the 14<sup>th</sup> of August 1941, Vigil of the Feast of Assumption, Saint Maximilian was killed with a carbolic injection in the extermination camp in Auschwitz. Since February 17 he had been put into prison by Hitler's slaves because of his courage to uphold the principles of Catholic Faith against the national socialist invaders. Since May he had been transferred to Auschwitz, where he had to suffer more than the other prisoners because he was a priest. One day, towards the end of July, one of the prisoners escaped. As punishment the Commandant ordered that ten other prisoners be condemned to an atrocious death — death from starvation and thirst in the dark "starvation dungeon."

When one of them started to cry desperately: "Oh my poor wife! My poor children! Who will take care of you?", Fr. Kolbe stepped towards the Commandant and said firmly, "I ask to die in place of that father of a family."

The Commandant was astounded for some minutes. A request of this kind was unthinkable.

"And why?" he asked Kolbe. "Because I am old and feeble, and he has a wife and children."

"Who are you?" the Commandant asked.

"I am a Catholic priest," was the answer.

His request was accepted. During the 10 days in the dungeon he prepared all the other condemned to die in peace with God and to enter heaven. When he was the last to be conscious after so many days, the order was given to kill him.

Desiring to commemorate the 75th anniversary of his heroic death, I want to write you this second letter.

No doubt, our Saint will give his knights on earth many graces during these days, therefore please join in a little novena (a prayer to Saint Maximilian Kolbe – see below) all Knights may pray from 5<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> August.

Fr. Maximilian prepared himself for this death during his whole life, prompted by an extraordinary event in his childhood which we know about from his own mother. Worried about his difficult character which he was unable to dominate, the 10-year-old boy began to pray fervently to Our Lady for help. One day, the Heavenly Mother appeared to him with two crowns in her hands, a white and a red one: the white, she explained, is the crown of purity, the red — martyrdom. Asked which one he would choose, he answered, that he would take both! Even if he

strictly followed rule of stepping out of the line. And more importantly, does a prisoner dare preach morality?! He could sentence both to death by starvation. After a few seconds, the SS-man said, "Gut" (very well). He agreed with Fr. Maximilian, and admitted that he was right. It meant that the good won over evil, the maximum evil.

There is no greater evil than to sentence a man to death by starvation through hatred. But neither is there a greater good than to give one's own life for another man. The maximum good won. I want to stress the replies of Fr. Maximilian: He was asked questions thrice and thrice he answered concisely and briefly, using four words. Number four in the Bible symbolically means the entire man.

— **How important was it for you and the remaining prisoners to be eyewitnesses?**

The Germans let Gajowniczek back to the line, and Fr. Maximilian took his place. The convicts had to take their clogs off, because they were already unnecessary. The door of the hunger bunker was opened only in order to take bodies out. Fr. Maximilian walked in as one of the last pair, and he even helped the other prisoner to walk. In principle, it was their own funeral before death. In front of the block, they were told to take the striped uniforms off and were thrown into a cell with an area of eight square metres. Sunlight seeped through the three bars of the window onto the cold, rough, wet floor, and black walls.

Another miracle happened there. Fr. Maximilian, although he had been breathing only with one lung, survived all. He was alive in the chamber of death 386 hours. Every doctor will recognize that this is incredible. After this horrendous period of dying, the executioner in white medical overalls gave him a lethal injection. Yet again, he didn't die.... They had to finish him off with a second injection. He died on eve of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, his Hetmanka (Commander in chief of the armies). He wanted to work and die for the Immaculate Mary throughout his life. It was the greatest happiness for him.

— **Referring to the first question, be so kind and add, please, what did this extra-ordinary attitude of Fr. Maximilian mean for you, being rescued from death by starvation?**

The sacrifice of Fr. Maximilian inspired a lot of work. He strengthened the activity of the camp group of the resistance, the underground prisoner organization, and it divided the time into "before" and "after" the sacrifice of Fr. Maximilian. Many prisoners survived the camp, thanks to the existence and operation of this organization. A few of us were rescued, two in every hundred. I received grace, because I am one of these two. Franciszek Gajowniczek was not only rescued but also lived another 54 years.

Our saintly fellow-prisoner rescued, above all, the humanity in us. He was a spiritual shepherd in the hunger chamber, supported, led prayers, absolved sin, and led the dying out to the other world with the Sign of the Cross. He strengthened the faith and hope in us who survived the selection. Amidst this destruction, terror, and the evil, he restored hope.

never spoke about this miracle to anyone during his whole life, it is easy to find out, that this vision orientated his whole life, inspired all his decisions, guided him in all his undertakings and finally prepared him for the crowning act of love: his heroic death! From this vision were formed his principles, life rules and guidelines. This vision was the first and principal invitation of the heavenly Queen to become Her Knight. When he answered generously and was the first enrolled by Herself to be Knight of the Immaculata, She promised him the two crowns.

Now through Her instruments SHE invited you to become Her Knight. And when you have been answering generously and have taken your enrolment seriously, do you think, that SHE would promise you less? Really, this vision pertains to each and every one of us! Each knight should deeply meditate about the “message” of this vision in order to receive once the same reward: the eternal crown in heaven!

Let us briefly present this message of the Queen to Her privileged Knight, and through him to us all:

1/ THE CROWN: When nowadays almost everybody understands his life on earth as the most important thing and often the only important one, the message of the double crowns orientates strongly towards eternity, and precisely to an eternal glory and victory in heaven. Whoever follows the footsteps of Saint Maximilian, will free himself from the worst of all illusions, the Masonic or Communist “paradise on earth”. He turns from the horizontal, being occupied constantly with his little ridiculous personality, towards the vertical perspective, from earth to heaven, from time to eternity, from exile to the eternal fatherland. Our Lady with this promise makes Maximilian Kolbe and all his knights understand the meaning of our short life in this valley of tears: there will be no other expectation in this world, but preparation, pilgrimage, long and laborious efforts. But our eyes, hearts, souls are fixed higher, according to the promise of Our Lord: “be faithful till the end, and you will earn the crown of life!” The promise of the two crowns correspond exactly to the magnificent words Our Lady said to Saint Bernadette in Lourdes: “I promise to make you happy, however not in this, but in the other world!”

2/ What is this reward exactly? It is a double crown, a double triumph: white and red! The crown for conserving heroic purity and giving his blood for the glory of God and the salvation of souls. But never forget, that essentially the crown belongs to the king and the queen. The crown of eternal glory you can find only on the head of the King of Kings and/or Our Lady, queen of heaven and earth. If our Lady offers to our Saint such a crown and even a double one, it means precisely that he is invited to participate in the glory and triumph of Our Lord and of Our Lady, and more precisely: the Sacred Heart and the Immaculate Heart of Mary! This again means: my eternal reward and happiness are the very treasures contained in the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary. These united hearts are the object of my desires, my meditation, my glory, my joy and my comfort: my one and all! In fact, the whole life of Fr. Kolbe was a constant meditation on his wonderful Mamusia (little Mother) and Hetmanka (commander in chief), and through her on the beauty of the Sacred Heart! These most holy Hearts should be also our ‘one and all’.

3/ Choosing the goal, you have to choose the means. If I want to obtain the crown of glory, my life on earth will be a constant striving after that which Fr. Kolbe names “OUR IDEAL”: the white crown - The Immaculata, and through Her the red crown - the Sacred Heart (see the act of consecration). He will always summarize the whole spiritual life in two terms: purity and blood,

stood dumbfounded. They looked at each other as they didn't know what was happening.

#### — What happened next?

Fr. Maximilian walked in his clogs and striped prison uniform with his bowl at his side. He didn't walk like a beggar, nor like a hero. He walked like a man conscious of a great mission. He stood calmly before the officers.

The camp commandant finally came to his senses. Furious, he asked his deputy, “Was will dieses polnische Schwein?” (What does this Polish swine want?). They started looking for the translator, but it turned out that the translator was unnecessary.

Fr. Maximilian answered calmly: “Ich will sterben für ihn,” pointing with his hand at Gajowniczek standing beside: “I want to die instead of him.”

The Germans stood speechless with their mouths open with amazement. For them, representing the secular ungodliness, it was something incomprehensible that somebody may wish to die for other man. They looked at Fr. Maximilian with the questions in their eyes: Has he gone crazy? Maybe we didn't understand what he said?

Finally the second question was put forward: “Wer bist du?” (Who are you?).

Fr. Maximilian answered, “Ich bin ein polnischer katholischer Priester.” (I am a Polish Catholic priest). Here the prisoner confessed that he was Polish and comes from the nation which these Germans hated. Further, he was admitting that he is a clergyman.

For SS men, the priest was a twinge of conscience.

It is interesting that, in this dialogue, Fr. Maximilian did not once use the word “please”. With his statement, he broke the German's usurped authority to decide on life and death, and he forced them to change the sentence. He behaved like an experienced diplomat. Only instead of a tailcoat, a sash, and medals, he presented himself in striped prison garb, a bowl, and clogs. The deathly silence prevailed, and every second seemed to last centuries.

Finally something happened, which neither the Germans nor the prisoners can understand to this day. The SS captain turned to Fr. Maximilian and addressed him formally with “Sie” (formal “you”) and then asked, “Warum wollen Sie für ihn sterben?” (Why do you want to die instead of him?).

All canons, which the SS man confessed earlier, fell apart. A moment ago he had called him the “Polish swine,” and now was turning to him with “Sie.” The SS men and non-commissioned officers standing beside him weren't sure whether they heard right. Only once in the history of concentration camps had the high-ranking officer who murdered thousands of people addressed a prisoner this way.

Fr. Maximilian answered, “Er hat eine Frau und Kinder” (He has a wife and children).

It is the entire catechism in a nutshell. He taught everyone what fatherhood and family means. He was a man with two doctorates obtained in Rome with “summa cum laude” (highest possible with honour), editor, missionary, academic teacher of two universities in Cracow and Nagasaki. He thought that his life was less worth than the life of the father of a family! It was a wonderful lesson in catechism!

#### — How did the officer react to words of Fr. Maximilian?

Everyone was waiting to see what would happen next. The SS-man was convinced that he was the master of life and death. He could order him to be beaten badly for breaking the most

dragged the unfortunate prisoner out of his place in the row, wrote down the number, and set him aside under guard.

“Du!” sounded like a hammer hitting an empty chest. Everyone was afraid that anytime the finger might point at him. The line under scrutiny moved a few steps forward, so that between the lines being scrutinized and the next line something like corridors formed, with a free space of a width three to four meters. The SS-man walked along this corridor and again said, “Du! Du.” Our hearts thudded. With noise in heads, blood throbbing in temples, it seemed to us that the blood would spring out of our noses, ears, and eyes. It was something tragic.

#### – How was St. Maximilian behaving during this selection?

Fr. Maximilian and I were standing in the seventh row. He stood on my left; perhaps two or three friends separated me from him. As the rows behind us dwindled, more and more fear started enveloping me. I must say, no matter how much a man is determined and frightened, no philosophy is then needed for him. Happy is the one who has a faith, who is able to fall back on somebody, to ask somebody for the mercy. I prayed to the Mother of God. I must honestly confess it; I had never before nor afterwards prayed so zealously.

Although there was still heard “Du!” ,the prayer inwardly changed me, enough for me to be calmer. People having a faith were not so terrified. They were ready to accept destiny with peace, almost like heroes. It is great consolation. The SS-man passed me by, sweeping with his eyes, and then passed Fr. Maximilian by. He “liked” Franciszek Gajowniczek standing at the end of the row, who was a 41-year sergeant of the Polish Army. When the German said “Du!” and pointed at him, the poor man exclaimed, “Jesus, Mary! My wife, my children!” Of course, the SS-men did not take notice of the words of prisoners, and just wrote down his number. Gajowniczek later swore that if he had died in the hunger bunker, he wouldn't have known that such a lament, such an imploring request came out of his mouth.

#### – After the selection was finished, did the remaining prisoners feel relief that the great terror was over?

The selection ended. The ten prisoners were already chosen. It was a closing roll-call for them. We thought that this nightmare of standing would end: our heads ached, we wanted to eat, our legs were swelling. Suddenly some commotion started in my row. We stood at intervals the length of our clogs apart, when all of a sudden somebody began going forward between prisoners. It was Fr. Maximilian.

He was going by in short steps, since one could not go by long strides in clogs, because it was necessary to curl one's toes in order keep the clogs from falling off. He was going straight towards the group of SS men, standing by the first row of prisoners. Everyone shivered, since this was breaking one of the most insisted upon rules, the breaking of which was brutally punished. The exit from the row meant death. New prisoners arriving to the camp, not knowing about this ban against leaving the row were beaten until they were incapacitated from work. It equalled going to the starvation bunker.

We were certain that they would kill Fr. Maximilian even before he managed to get through. But something extraordinary happened that was unheard of in the history of seven hundred concentration camps of The Third Reich. It has never happened that a prisoner of a camp could leave the row without being punished. It was something so unimaginable for SS men that they

holiness through suffering, prayer and sacrifice.

In other words, the white crown will be obtained, if you always and everywhere seek only to fulfill the WILL OF THE IMMACULATA, which is nothing else than virginity of the soul, the essence of Holiness.

This he wrote down very clearly in his “Rule of Life” at the end of his retreat in 1920: “I must become a Saint! I must become a great saint!”

Many times he explained the essence of becoming a Saint: the total conformity with God's will. And he insisted on the fact, that only the Immaculata has received the grace to form us, her children, to become saints: “from the degree of being close to the Immaculata depends our holiness” ... “If you really want to sanctify yourself, remember, that sanctification and perseverance (in striving to holiness) depends on the devotion to Our Lady”...

“Allow Her to lead you, and you will be convinced yourself, that the Immaculata is the shortest and surest way to holiness”. The white crown is the constant imitation of the Immaculata till I abandon my own will totally to embrace only what she wishes!

The red crown will be obtained, if you are ready to love God ‘until the end’: martyrdom is essentially the “love of God through suffering”, the greatest love is “to give the life for your brothers”. Therefore, he speaks and writes about these themes every day: “Man's life is made up of three phases: preparation for work, work, and suffering. Through these three stages God draws us to Himself. The more fervently a soul is devoted to God, the earlier it prepares itself for this third stage, in order to cement its love for the Immaculata with suffering borne out of love. For nothing unites us with the Immaculata and strengthens us so much in charity as this very love combined with suffering for love's sake. Precisely along this path of suffering we can find out whether we truly and unreservedly belong to her. In this third phase of our life we must show the greatest love for her, the love of a Knight! Love for God is perfected in suffering, as gold is purified in the fire.

It is important to mention here the extraordinary devotion of the Saint to the Blessed Sacrament and the Holy Mass. The daily Mass and Holy Hour (obligatory for all brothers in Niepokalanów in spite of their overwhelming work schedule) he considered as the most important time of the day.

Why? Because to gain the red crown we must be constantly united with the Precious Blood of Our Lord flowing out of his head crowned with the crown of thorns and from his pierced heart ... present in the chalice of the Holy Mass.

What a program for each Knight, exactly as Saint Louis Marie Grignon de Montfort described the ‘apostles of the latter times’: the Crucifix in the right hand, the Rosary in the left hand! The Crucifix is the sacrifice of Our Lord on the Cross present at the Holy Mass. And he who lives the Holy Mass imitating Our Lord constantly and generously will obtain the red crown. The Rosary is the symbol of the devotion to Our Lady like a chain which links the child to his Mother, the knight to his Queen. He who keeps true devotion to Mary and accepts her utterly and entirely as Mother and Queen, will obtain the white crown: he will receive from HER all wonderful fruits of holiness and purity.

4/ The fourth message included in that vision: to obtain the crowns you must fight: and because the crowns are the ultimate reward after the final victory, the fight will be life-long and it will be a heroic fight! So was the life of Saint Maximilian: from childhood he learned that SHE is the “commander in chief” of the Christian armies, and wherever SHE appears, the devil will try to destroy her with all his might and fearsome anger. On the other side, wherever Satan rules, SHE arrives in order to ‘crush his head’. The Church on earth is the Church Militant, and nobody can enter the Kingdom of Heaven without a constant fight against the enemies within (bad inclinations, concupiscence) and without (the devil’s innumerable armies) all his life long. Therefore, we should neither imagine nor desire a sweet happy and peaceful life on earth without trials and battles, on the contrary: waking up every day, the Knight is prepared for another day of fight to propagate and conquer the world and the souls for the “City of God”.

5/ A last consideration: how to fight? Again, see the very simple example of our saint: you must think about the crowns (meditations), you must ask for them (prayer), you must take the means. If you want to receive the crowns, then you must first desire and collaborate that everybody may recognize and submit to the King of Kings through our heavenly Queen. You must work for the triumph of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary in all hearts and each one in particular: in other words, to be Her faithful knight, instrument through which the Mediatrix of all graces can send the rays of graces into many souls for their conversion and sanctification.

And how will you do this? What are the weapons to make Jesus and Mary known and loved?

Once more: prayer, sacrifices, will of the Immaculata and all the other means left to your zeal and generosity. The same means to invite other souls to get the crowns and to go to heaven are the concrete practices to get your own reward: what you do for the others, you do it for yourself twice!

At the end of July Saint Maximilian walked into the dungeon with 9 other condemned to that worst of deaths, he brought all these guidelines and inspirations of the double crown to its ultimate realization: As he lived, so he died!

May his example and intercession make us more and more generous, so that we also may hear one day from the lips of Our Savior: “Come now, good and faithful knight, receive the crowns I promised you, when you decided to become the soldier of my Mother, the KNIGHT OF THE IMMACULATA!”

*With my priestly blessing*

*Fr. Karl Stehlin*

*Bombay, on the feast of Saint Anne, the 26<sup>th</sup> of July 2016*

**Interview with Michał Micherdziński, one of the last witnesses of the sacrifice of St. Maximilian Kolbe instead of a fellow prisoner, made the night of 29-30 July 1941 in the concentration camp Auschwitz-Birkenau.**

*by Fr. Witold Pobiedziński*

**— You were prisoner in the Auschwitz concentration camp for five years. You personally met St. Maximilian Maria Kolbe there. How important for you and the other prisoners was the presence of this monk amongst you?**

All prisoners coming to Auschwitz were greeted with the same words: “You did not come to a sanatorium but to a German concentration camp from which there is no other way than through the chimney. Jews can live for two weeks, priests live a month, and the rest live three months. Those who do not like it may just go to the wire.” This meant that they could be killed, because there flowed nonstop high-voltage current in the wires surrounding the camp. These words announced at the beginning of their detention deprived the prisoners of hope. I was granted incredible grace in Auschwitz, because I stayed in one block with Fr. Maximilian, and I was standing with him in one row at the time of the selection for death. I was an eyewitness of his heroic sacrifice, which brought hope back to me and other prisoners.

**— What were the circumstances of this event, which is still of so great and keen interest and inspires people to ask the question: Why did he do it, what values did he stand for?**

63 years ago, on Tuesday, July 29, 1941, at about 1.00 o'clock, just after the midday roll call, the alarm sirens howled. More than 100 decibels went through the camp. The prisoners, by the sweat of their brow, were fulfilling their duties. The howl of sirens meant the alarm, and the alarm meant that some prisoner was missing. The SS immediately stopped the work and began escorting prisoners to the camp for roll-call to check the number of prisoners. For us who worked on the construction of a nearby rubber factory, it meant a seven-kilometre march to the camp. We were rushed to report back.

Roll-call showed a tragic thing: There was one prisoner missing from our Block 14a. When I say “from our block” I mean that of Fr. Maximilian, Franciszek Gajowniczek, others and myself. It was a frightening message. All other prisoners were relieved and were allowed to go back to their blocks, and the penalty was announced to us — standing at attention without caps, day and night, hungry. The night was very cold. When the SS had a changing of the guard, we crowded together like bees — those standing outside warmed those in the middle, and then there was a change.

Many older people could not withstand the agony of standing in the night and in the cold. We wished for at least a little sun to warm us. We also expected the worst. In the morning, the German officer shouted at us: “Because a prisoner escaped from your block and you did not prevent it or stop it, ten of you will die of starvation in order that the others will remember that even the smallest attempts to escape will not be tolerated.” Selection began.

**— What happens with a man when he knows that this may be the last moment of his life? What feelings accompanied the prisoners who could hear the sentence condemning them to death?**

I'd rather spare myself remembering the details of this terrible situation. I will tell generally what the selection looked like: The whole group went to the beginning of the first line. At the front, two steps ahead of us, a German captain was standing. He looked you in the eye like a vulture. He would measure each of us and then raise his right hand and say, “Du!” that is “You.” This “Du!” meant that you will die of starvation, and he would go on. The SS-men