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**FR. LUIGI FACCENDA, O.F.M.CONV.,
AND THE KOLBEAN
MARIAN AND MISSIONARY CHARISM**

*Rosella Bignami**

Fr. Kolbe and Fr. Faccenda: Spiritual Bond

This is the story of two Conventual Franciscans who never met but whose lives are linked by their love for the Immaculate Mother of God. The first was St. Maximilian Kolbe, the martyr of Auschwitz, declared by John Paul II as "patron of our difficult times."¹ During his studies at the Franciscan theologate in Rome, when he was only twenty-three, Fr. Kolbe founded, on October 16, 1917, the *Militia of the Immaculata* (M.I.)—the Movement—with six other student friars. Today this Marian and missionary Movement, officially recognized as a *Public Association of the Faithful*,² is international, with a goal to "promote total consecration to the Virgin Mary for the purpose of spiritual renewal of individuals and society."

St. Maximilian also founded *Niepokalanow*, "City of the Immaculate," first in Poland and later another in Japan. At these centers was a friary of Franciscan priests and brothers using modern equipment to promote the Militia via the mass media. At times, this publishing apostolate produced one million magazines monthly as well as 125,000 copies of a daily paper for the nearly one million members of the worldwide *Militia*.

In 1941, Fr. Kolbe was imprisoned and sent to Auschwitz where he gave witness of faith and heroic charity through his

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¹John Paul II, Assisi, Address at the Tomb of St. Francis, November 5, 1978, in *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II* (Citta del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1978), 97.

²Pontifical Council for the Laity, *Decree of Erection*, Vatican City, October 16, 1997, #2827/97/AIC-75.

sacrificial death in the starvation bunker. He offered to take the place of one of the ten men condemned to die by starvation because of a fellow prisoner's escape. Ten days later, after leading his fellow prisoners in prayers and hymns, he was given a lethal injection of carbolic acid on August 14, 1941, the eve of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Fr. Kolbe was canonized by John Paul II on October 10, 1982, as the first "martyr of charity" in the Church's history.³ He gave witness of the *greater love*⁴ (see Jn 15:13) and left a precious legacy.

Fr. Luigi Faccenda received and promoted the spiritual and apostolic legacy of Fr. Kolbe. Born in a small village near Bologna, Italy, in 1920, he joined the Conventual Franciscans. In 1945, a year after his ordination, he was assigned to be director of the *Militia* in Bologna. He had no program or experience. He studied the spirit of the Movement wholeheartedly and researched the life and the charism of Fr. Kolbe whose heroic death had just been made known. Fr. Faccenda recalled that, as he was wondering about his specific place in God's plan, he had a spiritual encounter with Fr. Kolbe that changed his entire life. Looking at the example of his holy confrere, who freely gave up his life, offering to die on behalf of a father of three children, Fr. Faccenda found God's will concerning his own life, his apostolate and his priesthood:

From that moment on I never stopped. I studied the mystery of Mary through the Church's teaching and I understood that we cannot be Christian without accepting and loving Mary, the Mother of God. I experienced Her powerful mediation and I worked tirelessly so that schools, workplaces, families, hospitals and human hearts could listen to Mary's voice and her maternal invitation through a solid Catholic doctrine. As a consequence, many were conquered by this mystery of grace and hope.⁵

Fr. Kolbe recommended "bringing the Immaculata into the hearts of men, so that she may prepare in them a throne for her

³See Ugo Sartorio, "Il segno del martirio oggi. Verso una dilatazione del concetto classico di martirio," in *Credere oggi, dossiers di orientamento e aggiornamento teologico*. Anno VIII, nos. 4-47, settembre/ottobre 1988 (Padova: Ed. Messaggero), 87-93.

⁴John Paul II, "Canonization Homily" (Rome, October 10, 1982).

⁵Fr. Luigi Faccenda, "Omellie Sacerdotali," in *Orientamenti di Vita Spirituale* (OVS), X:131.

Son, bringing them to know Him and enkindle in them love for His most Sacred Heart." Fr. Faccenda concluded that the maternal mediation of Mary Immaculate, closely joined to her Son, the Redeemer of the world, and the action of the Holy Spirit, was the key to evangelization and the secret of holiness. He recalled, "I realized that in his Militia of the Immaculata Movement there was a secret which should have been known because in it many would have found hope."⁶ Just as Fr. Kolbe, in the face of hatred and atrocity, entered the darkness of the starvation cell, motivated by the purest love for God and his neighbors, so his life and testimony could be an inspiration for those who wanted to reach the fullness of Christian love.

Fr. Faccenda reflected on the spiritual bond uniting him to the life and message of Fr. Kolbe. When he received the honorary doctorate in theology (May 17, 1995), he stated,

I have come to understand, then, that St. Maximilian Kolbe's spiritual legacy is indeed limitless. Total consecration to the Immaculata with apostolic intent, which he lived and promoted, must be and is a true spirituality. Undoubtedly, Kolbe's is a very demanding legacy; for it requires imitation of him who made us his heirs. In fact, it is not a matter of possessing "something" of him, but of living his spirit. The legacy of the saints is above all what they did in response to God's will. To be their heirs means to allow God to work in us as He did in them—as He did in Saint Maximilian Kolbe and in many of his followers.⁷

Fr. Faccenda's Implementation of Fr. Kolbe's Marian and Missionary Charism

Fr. Kolbe thought of the *Militia* as a global vision of Catholic life under a new form—a bond with the Immaculata, our universal Mediatrix before Jesus. The consecration to the Immaculata is ultimately a converting to an evangelical life: a means to holiness and to apostolic commitment understood as a battle against evil—in oneself, in the surroundings, in the world—through the mediation and under the protection of the

⁶Faccenda, *Omelia per I Volontari dell'Immacolata—Padre Kolbe*, September 17, 1991, in OVS, IX:228 (translations from the Italian by the author).

⁷Faccenda, "Saint Maximilian's Contribution to the Intellectual Ministry of the Order: Conference for the Conferring of an Honorary Doctorate in Sacred Theology," Conventual Franciscan Theologians' Meeting, Rome, May 15-17, 1995, in OVS, X:248.

Immaculata. Fr. Faccenda spoke of the need for complete confidence in Mary: consecration is "to put our hand in her hand, to grip it strongly, because it is the hand of one who is Mother and Mediatrix, help and hope. Then, let her love make us pure as she is, while by her example and word she repeats to us: 'Do whatever he tells you'" (Jn 2:5).⁸

In seeking to understand well and to clarify the specific charism which the Spirit was giving to the Movement and later to the Institutes which he would establish, Fr. Faccenda began gradually to realize that the charism which Fr. Kolbe had left behind by his life and heroic death had to be received, interpreted, and developed according to the new needs of the time.⁹ He also discovered Fr. Kolbe's Trinitarian Mariology, in which each of Mary's prerogatives is related to one of the persons of the Trinity. In the conference in which he received his honorary doctorate, Fr. Faccenda noted:

The Immaculate Conception is the new creation, sublime work of the Father in Christ and in the Spirit. The divine maternity is relative to the Incarnate Word and the foundation of every other gift granted to the Virgin. Her mediation of graces finds its origin in her profound union with the Holy Spirit. . . . The Spirit dwells within her, fills her with Himself, and associates her with his sanctifying mission, so much so that one can say that the Spirit works "through" the Immaculata.¹⁰

Father Kolbe's ideal was not merely an emotional offering to the Immaculate Virgin. Rather, it was a commitment to make our own, as much as possible, her spiritual reality and her life of grace, so that her own life may take root in us and in the hearts of all men without any restriction. This is the meaning of total consecration to the Immaculata: a dynamic and total belonging to her. In Fr. Kolbe's mind this "total belonging to her" begins with our "being the property and possession of the Immaculata" and "instruments in the Immaculata's hands."¹¹

Belonging to and identifying with the Immaculata have an intrinsically apostolic value, because "the Virgin Mary is the

⁸Faccenda, *Il mio amore ha un nome* (Bologna: Edizioni dell'Immacolata, 1988), 51.

⁹Faccenda, "Saint Maximilian's Contribution," in OVS, X:231.

¹⁰Faccenda, "Saint Maximilian's Contribution," in OVS, X:235.

¹¹Faccenda, "Saint Maximilian's Contribution," in OVS, X:240.

model of that motherly love with which all who join in the Church's apostolic mission for the rebirth of humanity should be animated."¹²

The essence of the *Militia* spirituality was to entrust all to the Mother of God. Kolbe often spoke of the totality and the boundlessness of the consecration to the Immaculata; he repeatedly affirmed that he wanted to live, to work and to suffer for the Immaculata. He viewed this consecration as a transformation: "She will make you like herself."¹³ Fr. Faccenda sought ways to incorporate this transformation into a spiritual program. Making one's own Mary's attitudes was a concrete way of this *becoming her*. As described in Paul VI's *Marialis Cultus*, Mary is "the attentive Virgin," "the Virgin in prayer," "the Virgin-Mother" and "the Virgin presenting offerings."¹⁴ Fr. Faccenda presents the four realities of total consecration—"Four Pillars of Total Consecration":

- 1) the *interior life*, understood as a constant interplay between contemplation and action;
- 2) the *obedience of faith*, as a way to live in full conformity to God's will, humbly and generously, and allowing the Immaculate to guide our lives;
- 3) *heroic charity*, that impels us to love all people in a continuous gift of self;
- 4) the *offering of our whole being*, accepting and loving sorrows and sufferings so as to cooperate with Christ in the salvation of the world.¹⁵

Evangelization through Printed Media

In the midst of the post-conciliar Marian crisis, Fr. Faccenda committed himself and the members of the Movement to

¹²See *Lumen Gentium*, no. 65.

¹³SK 556, 991Q, in Anselm W. Romb, O.F.M. Conv., *The Kolbe Reader* (Libertyville, Ill.: Marytown Press, 1987), 112, 194. (SK = reference to *Gli Scritti di Massimiliano Kolbe* [Rome: ENMI, 1997]).

¹⁴Paul VI, *Marialis Cultus* ("For the Right Ordering and Development of Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary"), Apostolic Exhortation (Rome, February 2, 1974), nos. 16-21.

¹⁵See OVS, II:152-153; OVS, IV:89-90. Fr. Luigi Faccenda, *Era Mariana* (Bologna: Edizioni dell'Immacolata, 1995), 149-169.

evangelization. He strove to make known Mary's place in God's salvific plan by means of direct contact with different categories of people and by using the mass media. Following Fr. Kolbe's example, Fr. Faccenda began in 1946 the *Milizia Mariana*, a monthly publication of Marian spirituality and formation with a missionary orientation, addressed in a special way to families and youth. Today it appears not only in Italian but also in French, Portuguese and Spanish.¹⁶

In addition, Fr. Faccenda established a publishing house—*Edizioni dell'Immacolata*. In 1970, he began the *Marian Afternoons* that continue today. They are reflections on contemporary and personal events viewed from a Marian perspective. In 1974, in response to Mary's request at Fatima,¹⁷ he initiated the practice of the *Five Saturdays* that draws hundreds of people to Penance and to the Eucharist, in a spirit of prayer and reparation. In 1978, he began the *Meetings of Marian Theology and Spirituality* which the Institute sponsors in several locales, bringing together experts, theologians and scholars.

Two New Institutes: The Fr. Kolbe Missionaries of the Immaculata (Women and Men) and the Fr. Kolbe Volunteers of the Immaculata Associated Members

Fr. Faccenda's entire pastoral program was devoted to spreading Fr. Kolbe's ideal—consecration to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, culminating in the total giving of one's life. In the 1950s, a group of young women asked to consecrate their lives to God in the spirit of St. Maximilian. Although at first Fr. Faccenda was hesitant, with the encouragement of his major superior and the cardinal of Bologna, he dedicated himself to establishing what is now the Fr. Kolbe Missionaries of the Immaculata, a Secular

¹⁶For more information on the publications of the Militia, see www.mi-international.org.

¹⁷On December 10, 1925, Our Lady said to Lucia: "I promise to assist at their hour of death with the graces necessary for their salvation, all those who, on the first Saturday of five consecutive months, go to Confession and receive Holy Communion, recite a third part of the Rosary, and keep me company for a quarter of an hour meditating on the mysteries of the Rosary, with the intention of making reparation to me."

Institute for Consecrated Women, founded in the Marian Year, 1954. This Institute received its definitive recognition as a Secular Institute of Pontifical Right in 1992.¹⁸

Since its beginning, the Institute has aimed at achieving the perfect charity of its members and the fullness of their baptismal consecration, in order to realize in the Church and in the world a Marian, missionary and secular presence. The incorporated members profess the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience and strive to live the total offering of themselves to the Immaculata following the teaching and the example of St. Maximilian Kolbe. Fr. Faccenda always wished them to be at the service of humanity in every environment and social class. They are to promote the knowledge and the veneration of the Virgin Mary, work at the formation of Christian conscience, and be active in the new evangelization.¹⁹ In almost fifty years, the Institute has spread its presence and apostolic work in many countries of North and South America and Europe.

It has increased its effectiveness with the help of associated members, the Volunteers of the Immaculata, lay and clerical members who choose to work for their own sanctification and that of the world by way of the total consecration to the Immaculata in the spirit of St. Maximilian Kolbe and by sharing the spirituality and the mission of the Institute. Fr. Faccenda regards them as helpers of the Missionaries, in order to achieve the aim of the Institute more quickly and on a larger scale.²⁰

On February 11, 1997, the Fr. Kolbe Institute for Men began in Brazil, where an active national center of the Militia exists, led by Fr. Sebastiano Quaglio. In a letter of February 20, 1997, announcing the beginning of this Institute, Fr. Faccenda wrote:

With my complete approval and fatherly blessing, six Brazilian young men have begun an experience of common life, led by the enlightened wisdom of Fr. Sebastiano. For a long time these young men have been

¹⁸Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, "Decree," Prot. N. I. s. 3729/90 (Rome, March 25, 1992).

¹⁹See *Constitutions of the Fr. Kolbe Missionaries of the Immaculata*, no. 4.

²⁰*Constitutions*, Chap. One.

molded in St. Maximilian's ideal. Conquered by his bold spirituality, they are seriously thinking of an Institute with a missionary, Marian and Kolbean charism. A keen interest impels them: the desire to consecrate themselves totally for the cause of God's Kingdom, at the school and under the maternal guidance of Mary Immaculate, in order to be leaven of life for their fellow Brazilians and for all the people of the world, without distinguishing between nations or continents. . . . The spirit which animates them is the same spirit that stirred St. Maximilian Kolbe and the first Missionary women. . . . I wish to assure them that Auschwitz will be the common point of reference in order to keep the love for the Immaculata alive and to be always ready to live, work, suffer and die for Her holy cause; so that the world may believe that "only love creates."²¹

The apostolate of the Brazilian communities includes evangelization through the media and works of human promotion and development. Together with the Missionary women, the Missionary men work for evangelization in the footprints of St. Maximilian Kolbe by means of printed matter, including a monthly magazine and the twenty-four-hour daily broadcasting of *Rede Milícia SAT* that covers all of Brazil, and the more recent TV *Imaculada Conceição*, which currently broadcasts experimentally. *Rede Milícia SAT* is the largest Brazilian Catholic radio network; it provides twenty-four hours of evangelization without commercials and offers a daily program in preparation for the total consecration to the Immaculata with the doctrinal and spiritual contributions of many bishops and priests.

Fr. Faccenda defines the Kolbean ideal as *a total offering of oneself with apostolic intent*. He writes: "The consecration to Mary, by inserting us fully in God's salvific plan, puts us in the very heart of the salvific mission of the Church. Therefore, it cannot be reduced to a personal act made only for one's own sanctification, but rather it commits us to work for the conversion and the sanctification of all."²² Strengthened by the lived example and teaching of the founder, both the male and female Institutes have always devoted themselves to evangelize in the name of Mary, using all appropriate means, especially the

²¹Faccenda, OVS, XI:69.

²²Faccenda, *Era Mariana*, 171.

printed word and the media, which involve the laity in the same mission. Some of the apostolates carried out by the Missionaries include preaching the Word of God in catechetical classes, parish missions, and door-to-door visitations. The Missionaries also animate centers of spirituality, retreats, Marian conferences and meetings and collaborate in promoting the Militia of the Immaculata Movement. As members of Secular Institutes, they may also carry out many kinds of professional jobs in order to sanctify the world from within by seeking to instill Christian values in it, living the Marian attitudes and virtues.

Fr. Faccenda invites all to keep alive the apostolic pioneering that has characterized his entire life: "I think it is very important to regain the capacity of sensing and undertaking with courage new ways of evangelizing, showing in this way also the dynamic secularity of the Institute. It calls us to plunge ourselves into the world, in order to share the Gospel message with all our brothers and sisters."²³ The Institute has recently begun a *School of Evangelization* in order to form leaders able to bring the Gospel to a changing world. The participants, with the help of religious teachers, receive the essential tools for evangelizing in a two-year program of monthly meetings including conferences, lessons, panels, team work, and practical experiences.

The Legacy of Fr. Kolbe and Fr Faccenda: A Marian Spirituality in Action

"The spirit in contrast to external things does not grow old, but ought to develop without limits," Fr. Kolbe said.²⁴ With his untiring activity, Fr. Faccenda has carried the *golden thread of the cause of the Immaculata*—a reference which St. Maximilian made when referring to the history of the Franciscan Order and its promotion of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. Fr. Faccenda has actually helped to develop "the second chapter" of this glorious history. This spiritual heritage he has bequeathed to the Fr. Kolbe Missionaries and to the Vol-

²³Faccenda, OVS, XI:141.

²⁴SK 486, in. Romb, *The Kolbe Reader*, 79.

unteers. Fr. Faccenda has comprehended St. Maximilian's missionary spirit, his pastoral dynamism, and doctrinal insights, not only reproducing them but also reinterpreting them with his striking originality. He has developed a program for living total consecration to the Immaculata and furnished a Marian spirituality with a deep ecclesial spirit. He has brought to fruition many of Fr. Kolbe's intuitions and insights. He urges the Institutes to embrace a mission without limits and stresses the necessity of "being" missionary in one's heart and mind before being sent out. "The proof of the authenticity of our consecration to Mary lies in the desire to pass it on to our neighbors."²⁵

But Fr. Faccenda is not alone. The multitudes of lay and consecrated men and women who have joined the Movement and the Institutes of the Fr. Kolbe Missionaries and the Volunteers have been captivated by the same ideal. In many countries today they are contributing in the fields of evangelization, social communication, and works of charity. All these are motivated by the conviction that Christ wishes to lead all to the Immaculata, so that her maternal kingdom might extend to every corner of the world and to every moment of history, in order that together with her the Holy Spirit may continue to form the members of Christ's Mystical Body until the end of time."²⁶

²⁵Faccenda, *Il mio amore ha un nome*, 53.

²⁶Faccenda, "Saint Maximilian's Contribution," OVS, X:237-238.