THE TWISTS AND TURNS OF LIFE
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INTRODUCTION

Marco Polo describes a bridge, stone by stone. “Which one is the stone that sustains the bridge?”, asks Kublai Kan. “The bridge is not sustained by this stone or that one”, responds Marco, “but by the arch that they form.” Kublai Kan remains silent, reflecting. Then he adds, “Why do you talk to me about the stones? It is only the arch that is important to me.” Polo responds, “Without the stones, there is no arch.” (Italo Calvino, The Invisible Cities).

A person’s life can be compared to the bridge about which Marco Polo spoke. The bridge cannot be reduced to individual stones. It cannot even be identified only as the form of an arch. The bridge is the two aspects put together; one making sense of the other, one being a consequence of the other. Life is also like this. It is not only the consequence of individual days passed like they were single stages of a long journey. It is not even that same journey, viewed only in its entirety. Life is the two aspects put together: single stages that create one entire journey.
It is following this logic that we seek to retrace the life of St. Maximilian Kolbe. Not a simple recounting of the single events that characterized the life of a great saint; not even a general panoramic of his ideals and his journey realized. Rather, the attempt to follow the pathway of his life through the places that saw his ideals materialized, step by step; places that saw him as the protagonist of history, in first person: cities, convents, missions and then, the concentration camp and the wind, final place that welcomed forever the legacy of Maximilian.

A real and true tour along the personal history of the Polish friar; but not only that. The twists and turns of his life, in fact, become an occasion for a larger reflection upon our own life. And this is normal. It happens every time we compare ourselves with people who lived in the fullness of their time; people who innovated, who were able to read the social and cultural reality in which they lived, proposing new ideas and horizons; contemporary people, capable of combining the legacy of the past and the challenges of the present.

Father Maximilian Kolbe was one of these people. For this reason, it is difficult to remain indifferent before him, his story, and his choices, because they speak to the most intimate part of us; to the original nucleus that unites us all as humans, as children of the same Father. Father Kolbe’s actions challenge us to see beyond the
context in which we live and the society of which we make a part. His actions are the fruit of love, that love received to which one wants to respond with equal generosity. Love of God becomes love for man.

So the places of Maximilian become an invitation, a real and true proposal: to dream without limits, to leap even when we do not have all certainty, to innovate and make present that which is eternal, to pay attention and give heed to the unexpected, to seek always what is essential, to promote a development that places humans at the center, to be attracted always to new horizons, to hope against every hope, and to live fully our mission.

A bet on happiness; an invitation and a proposal to happiness.

See! Now it is your turn! Do not be afraid to dive into the folds of a story that, although distant in time, concerns you now.

Follow the footsteps of Father Kolbe, not so as to retrace his journey, but so that you are inspired by the signs of his love.

Be surprised by life. Have faith in God, in yourself, and in your brothers and sisters. And one stone after the other, build your bridge, your journey, your mission.
THE DREAMING PLACE
Have you ever seen in a dream that which you wish for your own life? Maybe you, like St. Maximilian Kolbe, can pinpoint the exact place in which this happened. It is from there that you can always leave again and find inspiration for your life’s journey. The start, in fact, is very important! It contains in itself, like a small seed, everything that is beautiful that can flower in the course of life.

Pabianice is a city in central Poland of about 70,000 inhabitants: some religious buildings, a castle, and a couple of museums. The Kolbe family moved to Pabianice in 1896, about the time their fourth son was born. It is a big city with more services than Zdunska Wola, the place where St. Maximilian was born.

Bethlehem comes to mind, as it also was a small central location at the time when Jesus was born.

The Polish city of Zdunska Wola is not small like Bethlehem. But, surely like the city of Judah, it was
entrusted with the history of a great man. These two cities, therefore, are our point of departure in our journey across the places that saw the unfolding of the life and mission of St. Maximilian Kolbe.

Pabianice is the dreaming place, where came to pass the first extraordinary event in the life of Raymond, as Fr. Kolbe was called before his profession of vows. We are in the church of St. Matthew, built around the end of the 1500’s. This is how the mother of Raymond recounts the story:

“One time I was not pleased with him about something and I scolded him, ‘Raymond, who knows what will become of you?’. And I thought nothing more of it. But I noticed a big change in his behavior, such that I barely knew him. I was worried. ‘What happened?’, I insistently asked him. ‘You must tell everything to your mamma’. Very emotional and with tears in his eyes, he told me, ‘When you scolded me, I prayed to the Madonna and asked what would become of me. One day, while I was in church and I was asking for help to understand, She appeared to me holding two crowns in her hands: one white and the other red. Looking at me with affection, she asked me if I wanted them. The white meant purity, and that I would give my life to God, and the red meant “martyr”, that I would give my life for others. I responded that yes, I wanted them... Then the Madonna looked at me sweetly and disappeared.’ The extraordinary change that had taken place in him, according to me, attested to the truth of the thing.”

In that church, Maximilian received an invitation:
Mary proposed to him a choice between two styles of life, two goals, two dreams. And he, like a true boy before something beautiful and irresistible, did not choose one of the two, but accepted them both. Recklessness? Courage? Dream?

A little bit of everything. From this small and apparently simple gesture, in fact, one can deduce the philosophy that would accompany Fr. Kolbe in his entire life: the idea to be and to live to the maximum, risking and investing in his own dreams every energy; not choosing this or that, but accepting all occasions and giving himself every day, to everyone. A wide-ranging philosophy of life, that does not put in place limits or blinders, but scans the horizon 360 degrees.

Pabianice is identified, therefore, as the springboard from which Maximilian would soar. It was here in fact that he received his First Holy Communion, and after coming to know the Friars Minor Conventual during a mission, he discovered the desire for the consecrated life.

Therefore, it is not just any city in central Poland, but above all the place of dreams and desires: to live fully this life and to do it together with Mary. Then, after the first proposal, many others will follow.

I ask myself:

Is there a physical or symbolic place in my life that I recognize as a dream for which I desire to spend myself?
Am I following my dream?
2
THE JUMPING OFF PLACE
Life is full of important turns. It never gets boring! By paying attention to what is presented to us, we can further realize our dream. Each step is like taking a leap that requires a decision, courage and faith. And thanks to this, it makes us grow and mature as a person, like the young Maximilian in Leopoli.

Maximilian Kolbe moved to Leopoli in 1907 to begin his formation in the religious life. Situated today in Western Ukraine, Leopoli is a very important city: almost 800,000 people, home of the University and a Polytechnic school, with the Old Town declared as a human heritage site by UNESCO. At the time of Maximilian it was an Austrian town, following the partition of Poland that occurred at the end of the 1700’s.

The first three years of formation proceed nicely. Maximilian is convinced of his choice, and he shows it by the great effort he puts into the life of prayer and study. But then comes a crucial moment, a crisis that will lead him to have to make a decision. For this reason, Leopoli can be identified as “the jumping off place”.
At the moment of beginning the novitiate, Kolbe finds himself asking if the religious life is really his vocation, or if he should instead join the army to free Poland. At that time in fact, the popular sentiment pushed many young people to enlist to defend their country. In the face of this doubt, something special happens.

“Then came about the unforgettable moment. While I was going to the Father Provincial to tell him that Francis and I did not want to enter the Order, the doorbell rang in the entrance parlor. It was you, Mamma; in such a critical moment, you came to visit us. That was how God changed our plans and made our doubts vanish.”

What happens to Maximilian is no different than that which many young men and women of the same age find themselves facing daily. It can be in reference to a course of study, or an affective relationship, or the vocational search; sooner or later we find ourselves before a crucial moment. After the first stage, in which we face everything with enthusiasm and diligence, there arrives something unexpected that calls into question our choice and places us before a crossroads.

In which direction do I invest my energies? Is that which I am doing really what I want? Could I dedicate my time and my abilities to something better?

Maybe these same questions crowded the head of Maximilian when, all of a sudden, his mother arrived. It was a simple meeting that changed his life. Nothing miraculous; a simple visit in which his mother wanted to express all her happiness in seeing her own sons follow a religious vocation.

See then, the extraordinary thing about that meeting was its ordinariness. Because it is in the
cracks and crevices of daily events that one finds the signs of God’s love. It is in the relationships with people who know us best that we have the possibility to discern our desires. Maximilian, after the meeting with his mother, decides “to jump”, to take the leap and live to the fullest his true vocation. A jump that presupposes a choice, and, therefore, a risk. A jump, but one that will change the history of everyone.

It is no different for us. Our life, after all, is the same as that of Maximilian Kolbe in that it has the same value and the same potentiality. And like him, if we will live to the fullest our vocation, if we will not be afraid and have the courage to live entirely for our dreams, then we will also take the leap and we will change history.

You could argue, now, that the jump we must make is into a void because, as it is, there are no certainties in which to trust. How can one make sure that it is the right choice?

It is true, there are no certainties. However, the initial doubts will never fade, thankfully, because they are a useful tool for testing and verifying our journey, for not taking choices for granted. After all, life is a continuous series of leaps and jumps. And therefore, Maximilian teaches us that we can entrust ourselves to Mary; we give her our hand before every jump, certain that she will never let go and will jump together with us.

I ask myself:

Were there moments I felt I had to dare to make an important choice?
Did I manage to make the “jump”?
THE INNOVATION PLACE
When he arrives in Rome, Maximilian is 18 years old. He will stay there seven years, completing his formation as a Franciscan friar, leading up to his priestly ordination in 1918. In 1917, he is the protagonist of an act that will change his story and that of millions of people: the creation of the Militia of the Immaculata.

It was February again, a Saturday, and Maximilian was taking a walk with other confreres through the streets of Rome, when they are faced with something that shocks them: violent and harsh attacks toward the Pope and the Church. Celebrating their day of foundation in London 200 years before and the founding of the first grand lodge, the Masons filled the streets of the Eternal City, manifesting every dissent and disdain possible for the Church.

Maximilian remains there shocked, wounded, and disgusted. He realized in that moment that it was no longer sufficient to pray only. He understood that it was necessary to act.

Behold now, the idea that spun around in
his head for quite some time became reality on October 16, 1917.

“After having developed his project plan, he manifested it to his most intimate companions who shared his ideas. ‘Is it possible that our enemies should be busy working until they prevail and we remain idle, as though praying without engaging in action?’ ”

There were seven of them that evening. They gathered in a room of the Seraphic College and during that informal and friendly meeting, they founded the Association of the Militia of the Immaculate. The reading of the program, approval and signing of the same; a few small actions that in itself manifested already the essence of what the experience of faith and entrustment to Mary would be.

When I think of the way in which the Militia of the Immaculate was born I cannot keep myself from comparing it to the birth of other great realities in the modern world. Companies, ideas, organizations that undoubtedly contributed to the construction of the current society.

I think of “Apple” and “Google”, of “Emergency” or of “Doctors without Borders”, of the John XXIII community or of the experience of Don Milani’s school. In short, I think of the concrete and innovative answers given to more or less explicit social questions.

This is not even counting the comparisons of these realities from a qualitative point of view or for the value of their goals. The interesting thing is the great actualization of Fr. Kolbe’s action, his gaze continually fixed on new horizons. He was capable of integrating the novelties of the
contemporary world—we have only to think of the use of the press and the radio—with the Gospel’s message of eternity.

Using a term of great actualization, we could say that the foundation of the Militia of the Immaculate was like the creation of a “startup”.

Yes, a missionary “startup” that--like many experiences that young people get involved with in the world--starts from a clear idea, and according to a defined objective and precise mode of action, begins the course to become reality.

The program that the small group of founders had signed included these parameters: a clear idea, that is, the happiness of all mankind in Christ; a defined objective, that is, the conversion and sanctification of all mankind; a precise mode of action, which is to pray and to use all legitimate means according to the possibilities in the various states and conditions of life. The idea is extremely simple and, therefore, revolutionary.

Rome, therefore, is the innovation place where Fr. Kolbe, with courage and faith, will lay the foundations of all his future actions. An innovation that is rooted in the past, in constantly seeing the novelty of the Gospel message, and that is yet realized through language and contemporary instruments.

I ask myself:

When faced with the need for goodness and solidarity in the world, do I feel myself called to be involved? How am I committed concretely speaking? Can I see clear objectives for myself? In what way can I be an innovator?
4
THE UNEXPECTED PLACE
For those who have played at least once “Monopoly” – the famous board game in which the players must acquire properties to then construct houses or hotels– one of the most feared spaces is the “chance” space. If you land there, you must draw a gray card that gives you an unexpected event, often an unfortunate one. Among the many, the one perhaps best known says: “Go directly to jail without passing ‘Go’.” At this point, the player must spend a turn in the space marked “jail” without being able to participate in the game. Thinking of the time spent by Fr. Kolbe at Zakopane, I believe that it was, in different proportions, a Monopoly-style unexpected event.

Returning to Poland, to Krakow, after the years passed in Rome, Maximilian can live and practice actively his ideal to lead all men to God by means of the Immaculata. The Militia of the Immaculata, in fact, becomes known and begins to spread among friars and laity.

Things are going swell until tuberculosis, probably a little neglected, takes Fr. Kolbe to a
sanatorium in the city of Zakopane to recover, with the order not to work anymore with the Militia.

Here is the unexpected on a course that seemed successful, with an increasing growth. In that moment, he really felt that he did not want this to happen...because how could Mary ever want this? Maximilian doesn’t know, but he obeys. In six months in the sanatorium, in fact, he does not deal anymore with his dear Militia. And neither will he do so in the following months of convalescence.

It is really in this apparently unfortunate period that he has the time to deepen and really lay the foundation of the Marian movement: “We did not make the M.I., and neither can we move it forward, nor do we know how. It is clear that we are an instrument in the hands of the Immaculata. What must I do to act as an instrument in the hands of the Immaculata and not according to my initiatives?”

Zakopane is an important ski station in the winter, while in the summer it is a popular destination for hikers and climbers. It stands in a large valley between the Tatra Mountains. The clean air, tranquility and beauty of the landscape makes it an ideal place so that sick people in need of rest, can return home as soon as possible.

To our eyes, as travelers among the places that saw the unfolding of the life and mission of St. Maximilian Kolbe, this mountain town becomes the unexpected place. In an unforeseen way, the cards on the table are reshuffled and one is forced to change course, in order to discover how our will, however just, cannot control everything. The only path that we are called to follow is that
of trust and cooperation to God’s plan.

The unexpected is understood, then, not as an obstacle but as an occasion. When one’s point of view changes and one discovers something new about which one never thought; a particular aspect that perhaps one took for granted because of the euphoria of a dazzling start, that novelty will be revealed as something fundamental.

It was exactly like this for the Militia of the Immaculata and Maximilian: after the beginning of activities full of success, he was forced to stop and to abandon the project momentarily. But it is really in this unexpected break that he discovers how important it is for him and his work to be instruments in the hands of Mary, a central aspect for the future of the entire mission.

It is in that situation that initially frustrates, that appears to be an error, that we can discover things of which we never thought. And it is always in that unexpected part of history that we have the opportunity to notice horizons that we never would have imagined.

I ask myself:

Have I ever happened upon an unexpected stop on my journey?
What sense did I make of that unexpected moment? How did it change me?
Can I see a crucial moment as a grand opportunity for change?
5

THE ESSENTIAL AND SIMPLE PLACE
In 1920, the headquarters of the Militia of the Immaculata was transferred from Krakow to Grodno, mostly to give more space for the work of the apostolate and to aid the health of Maximilian. The friars will remain there until 1927, the year in which they will transfer definitely to the place that will be the City of the Immaculate, “Niepokalanów”.

“Here there is the country air and the people are good. So it is pleasant to be here.”

These are the first words that Fr. Kolbe writes to describe the main characteristics of the town in which he will take the first active steps of evangelization with the M.I., that is the publication of the magazine, The Knight of the Immaculata.

The city of Grodno, now part of the Republic of Belarus, in the 1920’s was part of Poland.

The country lived a period of many, great economic crises. So it was too among the friars. They could not cover investments for a printing press, so much so that while his superiors gave
Father Kolbe permission to purchase one, they desired that the Order should not incur debts of any kind.

The convent that was given to the friars was previously used to house Russian refugees and “was small, situated on the outskirts of the city, in a very poor place, the incarnation of simplicity”, recounts Fr. Orlino, Minister General of the Order, when he went to visit them.

The convent was a type of Kolbean Porziuncula that will see the ideal of Maximilian formed more clearly. Above all, in this place will come to light the essential characteristics that the “knights” will be called to live as integral parts of this great dream.

“Whoever joins as part of the M.I. does not keep his heart only to himself, and neither only to his own family, relatives, neighbors, friends, or fellow countrymen, but embraces, with all these, the entire world; everyone and each one individually, because all are our brothers. For everyone desires true happiness, the illumination from the light of faith, the purification of sins, the inflaming of the heart through the Love of God, a love that does not place any limits on itself.”

Grodno is the essential and simple place, not only because of the style of life practiced by the first friars who lived there, but also for the extremely poor instruments and machinery that they had to use to print the magazine. Also for the continuous need to seek and seek again the heart of the ideal, and to return to it through the writing of articles.

Grodno is the essential place above all
because it leads Fr. Kolbe and his friars to the essence of the life they chose, and of the mission which the Lord entrusted to them. An essence that becomes the base not only of the future Niepokalanów, but of their own religious vocation because—in order to aim for the heights and be continually attracted to new horizons—it is indispensable to have strong foundations that support us.

Also in this case, the experience of Maximilian represents our own experience and that of many others when, in an attempt to realize a project in life, to follow an ideal and/or a vocation we are called to seek again the essence, the core of life that fully describes our dream, to which we return every time we feel lost. Like a tree that, in the middle of the strongest storm, finds again in its roots true safety. The roots for Fr. Kolbe and the knights, those of the past and of the future, are those that find a safe ground by holding on to Mary, the mother and true heart of all the M.I.

I ask myself:

When I think of my average day, what are the motivations for my commitments/duties?

Have I found the profound significance of who I am and of what I do?

Can I describe the original ideal/moment from where my vocation came to me?

What does it mean to me to be “essential”?
THE DEVELOPING PLACE
Finally Niepokalanów, the city totally dedicated to Mary. It is 1927 and in this city, built on land donated by a prince, Father Maximilian, the friars and all the volunteers that will decide to participate, will be able to live totally the ideal of the M.I. An entire city that works to bring God to all by uniting prayer and the desire to make everyone happy through meeting Christ and experiencing his love by means of Mary. One community only, composed of many members, each one committed to a specific role: printers, firefighters, shoemakers, cooks, just to name a few.

“Does, perhaps, the development of Niepokalanów consist in expanding its walls? No! And also when new and perfect machines will come in the future, neither then will there be progress in a strict sense. Also if the magazine would multiply its output, neither then will we have the development of Niepokalanów...So, then,
in what does the development of Niepokalanów consist? Niepokalanów is not so much external work, but first of all, the work in our souls. Every time that we will grow in conformity to the will of the Immaculata, it will be a step forward in the development of Niepokalanów. Therefore, if it were to happen that every activity was to cease, that the members of the M.I. were forced to this, that if we were dispersed like leaves in Autumn, if our souls were to remain more rooted in the ideal of the M.I., then we will be able to say that it will be the moment of greater development of Niepokalanów.”

Niepokalanów, then, is the developing place. A development not based on exploitation of the weak or success at all costs, but on the faithfulness to a dream. A development free from personal ambitions, which puts the happiness of everyone at its center.

Currently, as we are living in a time of economic crisis and unbridled success, Maximilian Kolbe’s idea of progress is the first revolution for which we must aim. The main objective in a project cannot be in the appearance, but in the substance; in the awareness of true success, not related to the quantity of money in a checking account, but to the quality of the proposals.

Adriano Olivetti, a great Italian entrepreneur from the beginning of the 900’s, said, “If I may, often the term ‘utopia’ is the more comfortable manner of liquidating that which is not desired, including the capacity or the courage to act. A dream seems a dream, up until one begins working
on it. And then it can become something infinitely more grand. The factory cannot look only to the profit index. It must distribute richness, culture, services, and democracy. I think the factory is for humans, not humans for the factory, right?”

Behold, Niepokalanów was not a factory in the strict sense, but proposed an idea of development that was possible and concrete, not utopian.

Clearly, this calls to mind other specific characteristics.

It recalls courage, because an ideal or a dream can become reality only if we are disposed to take risks, to invest all of ourselves, to fight to the end.

It recalls the importance of putting humans at the center, because the choice is and always will be between involving and valuing the person versus exploiting and using him/her for one’s own interests.

And it recalls the interior life, because no project can become great and remain faithful to its original intuitions if we do not take care of that little seed, and nurture it with the fruit that comes from the encounter between the human heart and the love of God.

I ask myself:
What does it mean for me to be fulfilled?
To my degree of freedom, am I obtaining visible results in terms of success?
Or am I watching over my interior growth?
What do I mean by “progress”? And “social justice”?
Can I go against the tide and focus on His values?
7

THE HORIZON PLACE
1930 is the year in which Maximilian Kolbe opens a new camp of action: Japan. Deprived of means and resources, but strong in his abandonment to Mary, in one month from his arrival, he was able to publish “Seibo No Kishi”, the Japanese version of the magazine “The Knight of the Immaculata”. To reach this goal, he lived together with a small group of friars in the most absolute poverty, renouncing even a secure roof just so he could spread the message of consecration to Mary in the East. And the results came quickly!

Before Fr. Kolbe’s desire to open a mission in Japan, a land so far away and unknown, the first question that arises is, “Why?” Why invest energy toward the other side of the world, when Niepokalanów still requires commitment and continuous innovation to grow and establish itself as the center of fraternity and evangelical witness? Why immerse oneself in a culture so very different, starting with the language, when
Europe was ever more in need of evangelization? Why question everything anew, running the risk of safely getting there only to meet suffering, misunderstanding, and great difficulty? For what motive? The answer we find, yet again, in the writings of the Polish friar, and in a particular word: limitlessness.

“One thing that is never lacking in Niepokalanów, because it constitutes its specific essence: it happens to be that ‘limitlessness’ of our consecration to the Immaculata. We have a voluntary, beloved ‘obsession’, and it is the Immaculata. We live, labor, suffer, and we desire also to die for Her, and with all our soul, in every way. With every invention, we want to implant this obsession in every heart.”

So here is the answer to our “why”: Maximilian leaves for Nagasaki because he cannot do without it, because it is a consequence of his choice to love all humanity; because his consecration is limitless, like his mission, like his gaze.

And Nagasaki, city of southern Japan, becomes the horizon place. Maximilian Kolbe reaches and exceeds that dream-boundary, due to his great desire to love.

To have eyes forward toward an infinite horizon means to not place limits on God’s action, to not confine oneself to the former limits in which one lived. Maximilian says it very well when he writes that their life, their work, their labors, and even their eventual death are the fruits of an obsession, of a unique and strong desire. This is what happens also to us when we come to invest in a passion, when every cell of our body stretches toward a single idea, ready to surpass
every horizon in order to follow and realize that idea. Unfortunately, at times it happens that after the first moment of enthusiasm, we tend to build small fences that close off our horizons. Fr. Kolbe, instead, tells us that there are no finish lines, but only starting lines, and every horizon achieved offers us a new one towards which to move.

Here is why Nagasaki is the horizon place, also in a physical sense: the Garden of the Immaculate, in fact, will be built at the foothills of Mount Hikosan, a little outside the center of the city. To pave the slopes takes a long time, but it’s worth it. Maximilian writes the same, “The people that live here are pagan. We are missionaries, and we must go in the midst of those who do not know the Gospel. And just think...here, in the morning we can observe the sun rising over the mountain; to the West we can admire the city that lies before us, and every evening the sun sets over the bay, the city and Mount Inasa.”

A natural horizon, therefore, that opens one toward meeting others, toward mankind, for whom Fr. Kolbe dedicated his entire life.

Also a prophetic horizon about the end of the Second World War, when the atomic bomb would be launched upon the same Nagasaki. The Garden of the Immaculate, in fact, will not suffer serious damages thanks to the fact that it was built at that location. It will accommodate many homeless and injured people.

I ask myself:

Was there a time in life when I impeded the action of the Holy Spirit?
Conversely, were there times when I allowed my conditioned limits to be broken in order to open myself to new horizons?
THE HOPE
PLACE
The final phase of Maximilian’s life has the bright colors of open defiance between good and evil. What characterized his life was the strong affirmation of the good at any cost. This reached its highest peak in the concentration camp of Auschwitz. Paradoxically, that place of hatred and darkness becomes the new mission camp in which the heart of St. Maximilian Kolbe makes itself the sign of the paternal presence of God and the maternal presence of the Immaculata for everyone. Auschwitz, the place in which Kolbe conquers evil with good!

It is February 17, 1941 when Maximilian is finally arrested. He is imprisoned first in Pawiak Prison in Warsaw and then in the concentration camp of Auschwitz, a place that meant extreme suffering for millions of people, including the negation of human dignity, and the loss of every hope.

A place that for Maximilian, instead, became the physical and relational space in which he testified to the hope and tenderness of God. One could say it is an impossible mission and it would be so for anyone, even for Fr. Kolbe, if that last stretch of road were not the fruit of an entire life, the summary of many little acts of love, the constant exercise of the gift of self.
Just arrived in the concentration camp, Maximilian writes a letter to his mother, “My beloved Mamma, toward the end of May I arrived by train in Auschwitz. Everything is going well for me. Beloved Mamma, be at peace for me and for my health, because the good God is everywhere and with great love thinks of everyone and everything.”

At first glance, it could seem the words of a son that is desperately trying to pacify his mother with a story that is different from reality. If we read it, instead, in the light of the life of Kolbe, we cannot recognize anything but the truth.

Really, for him, “everything is going well”. He really believes that “the good God is everywhere” and that “with great love [He] thinks of everyone and everything”. Words that are the fruit of a journey, of faith cultivated and lived day after day, that has the capacity to express itself even in the worst conditions.

Auschwitz was located in Poland. Together with another nearby camp, it made up a part of the big Nazi extermination complex. It saw the passing of many people who ended their lives there amid the hardest working and living conditions. Sadly, the famous phrase that welcomed those who entered the camp was, “Work will make you free”; one of the many lies told to hide from the eyes of the world what was going on within those walls.

It was those red walls and tree-lined avenues that witnessed the worst atrocities that made Maximilian fully realize his duty as a witness of charity and God’s tenderness, thus transforming the place of death into a place of hope.

And he did this by continuing to live every day of his life in this way: entrusting himself
to Mary, surrendering his heart to Her, making himself an instrument in Her hands.

There are three things that allowed Maximilian to transform desperation into hope that we, ourselves, can also do.

First, the daily self-training in charity in such a way that in moments of great trial, we have the stamina to run through the finish line.

Secondly, the patient and constant construction of hope, like a house made of little bricks.

Thirdly, the growth of the desire of faith, which allows our eyes to see a little beyond appearances, through the slits of a desolate reality toward the good news of a better world.

And we recognize the way to do this is through the three theological virtues, faith, hope, and charity. It is no wonder, then, that they are the three virtues that belong to God and allow us to live in union with Him. A relationship with God, at its deepest level, is the one thing that can truly bring about the transformation of places of desperation into places of hope. If we love, it is surely by faith that this love changes the world; certainly we are already living that hope today.

I ask myself:
Hope is not a simple wish, but is really the certainty that God is with us.
According to this definition, how is my relationship with Him? Is it living, real, something I experience?
Am I willing to trust Him?
In what way do I practice my charity?
What are the little bricks with which I build my house of hope?
In what way am I practicing my desire of faith?
THE MISSION PLACE

9
Our voyage among the most important places in the life and mission of St. Maximilian Kolbe is coming to a conclusion. A long trek that brought us to discover how the places in which he lived and which saw his mission come to life were often co-protagonists, themselves. For this reason, they can be seen now as stages of a spiritual and missionary journey that we also can walk.

The last place of the life of Fr. Kolbe is “the wind”. And the wind is the mission place.

If we think of the wind, it is one of the means that pollens use to move around in space and fertilize the flowers so that they bear fruit. Ideally, it is to the wind that we entrust our words or our thoughts so they reach those who are far away. Furthermore, the wind is an invisible force, however, capable of reaching every corner of the earth.

When he was a missionary in Japan, speaking with his friars, he expressed the desire that at the
moment of death his ashes would be consigned to the wind so that they could reach every corner of the earth. A desire that, although in a violent and heinous way, was actualized in the concentration camp of Auschwitz. Maximilian, in fact, after offering his life in exchange for that of another prisoner, will pass through the crematorium chimney with other companions, becoming ashes dispersed to the wind.

“It was an enormous shock for the whole camp, that we recognized that someone among us, in that dark night of the soul, had raised the standard of love to the highest peak. An unknown man—one like many—tortured, deprived of a name and social status, gave himself over to a horrible death to save someone that was not even his relative.

Thousands of prisoners were convinced that the world would continue to exist and that our torturers could not destroy it.

And as long as we will live, we who were in Auschwitz, we will bow our heads in memory of what happened. That was a shock that returned us to optimism, that regenerated us and gave us strength. We were left speechless by his gesture, which became for us a powerful explosion of light capable of lighting up the dark night of the camp.”

The testimony of Giorgio Bielecki, himself a prisoner in Auschwitz, fully describes the emotions that Fr. Kolbe’s choice—for it was truly a choice—evokes in the present. His mission was
accomplished, but not concluded on the 14th of August, 1941. His ashes have truly reached all the ends of the earth. They continue still today to be a testimony that love is truly the only creative power that can change history.

So what can we take away from all this?

From Pabianice as the dreaming place, up to the wind as the mission place, Fr. Kolbe left us a path to follow; not to retrace his own steps, but to find in this witness the inspiration to make our lives a masterpiece.

Maximilian Kolbe’s masterpiece is a journey, a continual training of life, not as individual stages or random events, but as a real and true evolution; not pre-planned, but lived with the desire to be surprised every day by God’s imagination. For this reason, the final place is the wind, a sign of that “letting oneself be led” that St. Maximilian prayed, lived, and entrusted each day into the hands of Mary.

I ask myself:

If I look at my personal story, can I see the progress made so far? Do I have the courage to let myself be led by the wind of God?