History and perspectives of the Militia of the Immaculata

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Introduction

The Militia of the Immaculata (MI), a Marian association founded by St. Maximilian Kolbe and six confreres, celebrates 100 years of life. This is a significant recurrence that requires reflection on the work of this institution promoted by the Polish martyr. In a recent letter, Fr. Marco Tasca, Minister General of the Friars Minor Conventuals, emphasized the following:

"The years 2016 and 2017 are particularly significant as regards the legacy left to us by St. Maximilian Kolbe. The mentioned years mark respectively the 75th anniversary of his martyrdom and the centenary of the foundation of the Militia of the Immaculata (MI). I consider it is important to take this opportunity to reflect on the example of the martyr of the charity of Auschwitz in order to find ideas and motivations aimed at enriching the experience of our Order. His word and example should be valued and updated, because even today they can offer the Friars Minor Conventual new ideas for interior and apostolic growth."¹

Welcoming the call of the successor of St. Francis, in this article we will propose the three phases of the journey, distributed in as many paragraphs, of MI history. This association officially begins its apostolic journey on October 17, 2017 and its pastoral action develops especially in those nations in which the Friars Minor Conventuals work, even if it will be immediately clear that this movement will have a worldwide expansion. We will describe the beginnings of this institution, highlighting the basic characteristics and purposes that are the basis of its existence. Obviously in this stage Father Kolbe is constantly present and it is he himself who marks the rhythms of the apostolic initiatives. Later, we will deal with the second stage, characterized by the opening to the laity, predicted by St. Maximilian, materialised after the changes brought by the Second Vatican Council and sealed by its new status as an international public association of the faithful received by the Holy See. In the last part of this work, we will evaluate the prospects of MI, considering the approval of the new General Statutes (on March 25, 2015) by the Vatican authorities and the renewed missionary outlooks that emerge in a peremptory way from the official acts of this movement and the requests

¹ M. TASCA, San Massimiliano Kolbe, continua la sua profezia. Lettera del Ministro Generale dei Frati Minori Conventuali a tutti i frati, Roma 2017, 1.
coming from the magisterium of Pope Francis. On the background of this article, the reader will always be able to notice the missionary imprint of Kolbe, whose prophecy continues to be very relevant today, as Fr. Marco Tasca highlights in the aforementioned Letter.

1. The birth of the MI: the initial journey under the guidance of St. Maximilian

St. Maximilian founded the MI together with six confreres of the Seraphic College of the Friars Minor Conventual in Rome, in via S. Teodoro. Kolbe himself tells the beginnings of the movement, describing the motivations and circumstances for which it started. The text that we propose below is part of a report held by the saint to the religious of his community in Nagasaki, on October 16, 1935, on the anniversary of the foundation of the association:

"I remember talking with my brother clerics about the wretched state of our Order and about its future. And in those moments, the following idea was being impressed on my mind: either rebuild it or break it all up. I felt deep sorrow for those young people who often came to us with the best intention and most of the time ended up losing their ideal of holiness in the very friary. Yet I did not quite know what to do […].

When in Rome the Freemasons started coming out in the open daringly, flaunting their banners under the windows of the Vatican, depicting, on the black banners of the followers of Giordano Bruno, St. Michael the Archangel crushed under the foot of Lucifer, and openly lashing out against the Holy Father in propaganda pamphlets, the thought came of setting up an association committed to fighting Freemasonry and other servants of Lucifer. To make sure that such idea was coming from the Immaculata, I sought counsel from my spiritual director at the time, Fr. Alessandro Basile, a Jesuit, ordinary confessor of students at the College. Having obtained assurance from holy obedience, I decided to get down to work […].

Thus, with the consent of the Fr. Rector, on October 17, 1917, the first meeting of the first seven members took place, namely: (1) Fr. Iosif Pal, a young priest of the Romanian Province; (2) Br. Antoni Glowinski, deacon of the Romanian Province (d. October 18, 1918); (3) Br. Girolamo Biasi, from the Province of Padua (d. 1929); (4) Br. Quirico Pignalberi, of the Roman Province; (5) Br. Antonio Mansi, of the Province of Naples (d. October 31, 1918); (6) Br. Enrico Granata, of the Province of Naples; (7) myself.

The meeting took place at night, in secret, in a locked, inner cell that was constructed by means of a temporary wall. In front of us there was a little statue of the Immaculata between two lighted candles. Br. Girolamo Biasi acted as secretary. The purpose of this first meeting was the discussion of the "program of the MI" (the enrollment form), especially since Fr. Alessandro Basile, who was also confessor to the Pope [Benedict XV], had promised he would ask the Holy Father for a blessing of the MI […].

For more than a year after that first meeting, the MI made no progress. In fact, all kinds of setbacks piled up, to the point that members were uncomfortable even mentioning it among

\(^2\) KW 1278.
themselves. One of them even tried to convince the others that the MI was something useless. [...] membership started to increase, and has increased more and more ever since. In that early period of life of the Militia, our activity - besides private prayer - consisted in handing out medals of the Immaculata, called "Miraculous Medals." On one occasion, the same Most Rev. Fr. General gave us money to purchase some."³

The foundation of the Mi was fundamentally motivated by the answer that Kolbe wanted to give to two situations that worried him greatly, namely the persecutory action of Freemasonry against the Church, attacked and oppressed in a very explicit way, and the condition of fragility and difficulty that the Order of Friars Minor Conventual lived in the period when the saint was in Rome for his formation (1912-1919). We should add to that the concern related to the consequences that the First World War can unleash throughout the world. The beginning of a new Marian path can be translated, according to the martyr of Auschwitz, into "balsam" for the whole ecclesial reality and for his religious family. St. Maximilian tells the origins of the journey of this Marian institution, which takes its first steps with the contribution of seven young friars who, despite their inexperience, dream of a great association dedicated to the Immaculata, in which, relying on Her, they can give new light to those who carry out an itinerary of faith or to those who have lost it or even oppose it.

Their means are: prayer, offering God their own sufferings, testimony and evangelization. It is an ambitious project that, in the hands of Mary, becomes a reality and today has a hundred years of life. The first times of the Mi journey is characterized by labors and uncertainties. In fact, the intuition of Kolbe and the six co-founders is not immediately understood by the confreres and is hardly accepted. Moreover, the initial apostolic activity is limited to prayer and to the distribution of the miraculous medal. However, after these difficulties, the mission of the new movement begins to spread like wildfire in all the pastoral realities in which the Conventuals operate. An ever increasing number of friars are asking to join the association and soon they are also followed by a multitude of lay people.⁴

"At the International College in Rome, inside a poor little cell, locked, but with the Superior's permission, seven young clerics, wearing the habit and girded with the Franciscan cord, armed with spiritual sabers, that is, Franciscan rosaries, examined the points of the first statute of the Militia of the Immaculata. Above them, between two lighted candles, a little statue of the Immaculata had been placed.

By summoning these young and inexperienced friars, the Immaculata already knew that within a year she would be holding two of them close to her immaculate and motherly heart.

³ KW 1278.
⁴ Cf. R. Di Murro, Come Massimiliano Kolbe guarda al mondo, la sua risposta, in Miles Immaculatae 70 (2014) 174-175.
in heaven; that shortly after, a third one would follow them; and that the others would be scattered around the world. She also knew that others, in ever increasing numbers, would join them and that today their number would be almost one million. She knew that some would work with greater or lesser zeal, and that others would come together in a more structured way, in order to win over souls to her more promptly, more efficiently, and in a concerted effort, in keeping with appropriate rules. She knew that others would break down all barriers in consecration to her, to the extent of enclosing themselves in her "garden," to sacrifice their whole lives for her exclusively. In addition, her knights would not confine themselves to defending the faith, but would attack, launch an offensive, conquer enemy strongholds. Yet they would advance always fostering in their hearts a love without limits toward their neighbors, the love of the Immaculata herself, even if their neighbors were not only foreigners, of a different race or different color, but even open enemies of religion, of the Immaculata, of God. And they would march on with hatred, implacable hatred, the same hatred the Immaculata herself harbors against evil and against sin, even if minor. Each conversion and every step on the way to sanctification are the work of grace, and the dispenser of all graces that flow from the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus is none other than His Mother, the Immaculata. Thus, the closer a soul gets to her, the more abundantly it can draw on these graces. As a result, our key mission is to bring souls closer to her, to lead her to the souls' salvation.

Who writes here is a mature Maximilian, who is able to appreciate the work of God that is developing through the mediation of the MI. What has allowed an exponential development of the association is above all, in his opinion, the intercession of the Immaculata and her motherly accompany this new missionary journey. Kolbe is convinced that the goal of this foundation is to let everyone know the beauty of belonging to Mary and her maternal presence in human life. Moreover, she represents the strength for every member who, thanks to her, can happily immerse himself/herself in a limitless apostolate. Ultimately, she represents the strength, motivation and purpose of the Militia.

With these words St. Maximilian describes the development of the MI in a famous audition held in the Polish national radio studios on December 8, 1937:

"The belief in the Immaculate Conception of the Most Holy Virgin Mary, whose solemnity we are celebrating today, traces its origins back to the beginnings of the Church, even though the dogma was defined only in 1854. Three years later the Immaculata herself, in Lourdes, answered thus a question of Bernadette: "I am the Immaculate Conception." After the proclamation of the dogma, devotion to the Immaculata spread extensively around the world, and many associations have committed themselves to fight beneath her banner for God's reign on earth. One of these associations is the Militia of the Immaculata, which has adopted the initials "MI," taken from the Latin Militia Immaculatae, as the name it is known by internationally, and which this very year is celebrating its twentieth anniversary. The circumstances that led to its foundation were the ever more provocative demonstrations that Italian Freemasonry was organizing against the Church, in the city of Rome itself: it hoisted its flags, for example, below the windows of the Vatican, flying a banner on which Michael the Archangel was represented underneath Lucifer's feet, and so on.

5 KW 1277.
Mindful of the decision of Freemasonry "We can defeat the Catholic religion not through reason, but by perverting morals," a small group of young students of the International College of the Franciscans in Rome resolved to repel the attacks against the Church and to aid souls in their search for the way that leads to God in the endeavor of conversion and sanctification precisely through a renewal of morals. Moral laxity originates mainly from a weakening of the will. And who is capable of strengthening the weak human will if not she who is immaculate since the first instant of her own existence, the Mother of divine grace? So, during the first meeting of the Militia, which took place in Rome in 1917, the following program was established: self-commitment, through the Immaculata, as instruments in her hands, to the endeavor of the conversion of sinners and of all those in need of it, and to the sanctification of all.

During the following year, the MI was already spreading to Poland. It developed first in the Franciscan seminary at Krakow, but later, after the publication in the Polish language of the card for enrollment into the MI, it started to bring in vast circles of people outside the walls of the friary.6

In this important statement, twenty years after the foundation of the MI, Maximilian continues to underline the prophetic role of the association, which has spread in a very significant way, by virtue of the nobility of its ideal and of the custody of the Immaculata. Also in this case, the saint describes the initial phases of the movement, which take place under the banner of the greatest simplicity, but which "open" to an inexorable growth in many countries of the world. According to the saint, the Church is extremely in need of help, given the attacks on her by the masonry and the relaxation of many of its members.7

The MI grows because of its strong spiritual assumptions: for this reason its journey develops without ceasing.

"The MI was started and developed through holy Obedience. It could not have been otherwise, for its essence is to belong to the Immaculata […] The essential component of such a transformation consists in conforming, in merging, in uniting our will with hers. Undoubtedly, her Will is fully joined to the Will of God. […] But only holy Obedience is able to manifest God’s Will, her Will infallibly."8

Kolbe's words make it clear that

"The MI, like all the great apostolic works that Fr. Kolbe starts and develops, has its origin in listening-accepting God's will. Moreover, the Immaculata is a model of docility and

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6 KW 1222.
7 Cf. DI MURO, Come Massimiliano Kolbe, 175-176.
8 KW 579.
availability in the fulfillment of the divine will. Mary’s will coincides perfectly with the will of the Most High: her intercession, her example and protection lead the believer to live authentic obedience, which is the way to achieve the project of God. Listening enables the believer to exercise his/her creativity and originality in the full availability to adhere to the divine dispositions: it is an exercise of the will, is indicative of the fulfillment of an ascetic journey. In St. Maximilian, obedience and trust in God are closely connected and are part of a singular attitude of the heart. The acceptance of God’s will lived in the "night" and in the interior prostration, the lack of understanding the plan of God, despite the maximum entrustment to Him, leads to heroism.\(^9\)

The \textit{MI} started its journey with the contribution of seven young friars and soon obtained the official recognition of the Church, according to the modalities that St. Maximilian himself describes in a propaganda leaflet of March 1938:

"The Militia of the Immaculata is not a very old association. It was set up, in fact, in Rome in the year 1917, at the International College of Friars Minor Conventual. On January 2, 1922, the Militia obtained legal status within the Church as a "Pia Unio," a pious association, in accordance with the following decree of Cardinal Pompilj, Vicar of the Holy Father for the diocese of Rome: "With the fervent desire that devotion to the Most Blessed Virgin may extend everywhere, by our authority we establish canonically the pious association commonly called 'the Pious Union of the Militia of Mary Immaculate' in the chapel of the Seraphic College of the Friars Minor Conventual in Rome and approve what was established. From the seat of the Vicariate, on January 2, 1922. Cardinal Basilio Pompilj, Apostolic Vicar."

Four years later, on December 18, 1926, the Holy Father Pope Pius XI promulgated a Brief which granted numerous indulgences to members of the "Militia of the Immaculata," while on April 23, 1927, the same Pope Pius XI, with another Brief, elevated the Militia of the Immaculata to the dignity of "Primary."\(^10\)

The Kolbe association is accepted in the Church as "Pious Union" on January 2, 1922. Five years after its foundation, the MI obtains ecclesial recognition, which allows it to be widely distributed in Italy, Poland and in other countries of the world. Furthermore, two other papal documents must be considered: two briefs, respectively of 1926 and 1927, which grant indulgences to the Marian movement, elevating its dignity. This is a very promising start, which bodes well for a bright future. We specify that in the code of canon law in force in 1917, pious unions are considered associations that promote works of piety and have at least a basic organization. The fact that the \textit{MI} has a headquarters in Rome means that it has the possibility of aggregating to itself other centers scattered around the world.\(^11\)

\(^9\) Di MURO, \textit{Come Massimiliano Kolbe}, 177.
\(^10\) KW 1226.
For the "knights" of the Immaculata the entrustment to her is the heart of their journey of faith. The help and custody of Mary are fundamental for those who adhere to this movement. We know that Kolbe, on many occasions, insists on the importance of belonging to the Mother of God and how this dimension is strategic for one's own personal sanctification and to carry out missionary activity.

The words of the Saint are remarkable:

"We all know well that the Virgin Immaculate was established by God Mediatrix of all graces. In fact, no one converts or is sanctified without the grace of God, for it is the grace of God that brings about conversion and sanctification, provided that the soul wishes to collaborate with such grace. For this reason, therefore, one can speak neither of conversion nor of sanctification without the help of the Immaculata, the Mother of divine grace. Indeed, the closer one comes to this Dispenser of divine graces, the more graces one obtains, the more easily one is made holy and contributes to the sanctification of others. Is it logical, then, that we should be committed to the work of conversion and sanctification of souls under the protection and through the mediation of the Immaculata."\(^\text{12}\)

For St. Maximilian it is essential that MI members belong to the Immaculata:

"The essence of the MI lies in the unlimited consecration to the Immaculata. We are to be her servants, children, slaves, etc., etc., etc. In a word, we must belong to her in every respect, must be hers as closely and as perfectly as possible, be somehow the same as herself. But he who loves the Immaculata selflessly, who loves her not for himself, but for her only, cannot be content merely to love her. Rather, he will make sure that others love her as well, that they also may belong to her in every respect, become her own just as he is hers, or even more fully. That way he becomes a Knight of the Immaculata, who wins over hearts to her. He becomes MI. And the more he himself becomes her property, the more souls he wins over to her, and becomes her knight. That is why the essence of the MI is to belong to her in every respect. Even the "Children of Mary," therefore, are not in the least alien to the MI."\(^\text{13}\)

Moreover, in an article of 1924, he states that

"The essence of the MI is constituted by the total offer of ourselves, without limits or conditions, to the Immaculata as her property, so that She can do whatever she wants with us and through us act inside others (a formula of this consecration is found in the registration card which is attached to the program).
The second condition, or rather the outward sign of this offering of oneself to the Immaculata for life, death and eternity, is Her Miraculous Medal, which MI members carry on their chest.

\(^\text{12}\ KW 1226.\)
\(^\text{13}\ KW 634.\)
Thus becoming instruments in the hand of the Immaculata, every day they pray to Her with ardent fervor, repeating the words that She herself showed impressed on the Miraculous Medal: 'O Mary conceived without sin, pray for us that we resort to You'; furthermore, remembering also those of whom they desire salvation, they add: 'and for all those who do not recur to you, especially for the Freemasons'; finally, they include those people whose conversion is particularly close to their hearts, and mention them individually or with a generic formula, for example: 'and for those who have been recommended [to You]', thus including all those who have recommended at any time in their prayers, all those who are mentioned in the Rycerz\textsuperscript{14} etc.. It is the power of prayer that every day rises to the Immaculata from thousands of hearts."

An essential condition for being part of the MI is the entrustment to the Immaculata. This is the act by which the knight totally "abandons" himself/herself to her love and protection. It is a question of belonging to Mary without conditions so that She may purify and support the journey of believers, who are consequently put by her in a condition of continual conversion. Furthermore, the more and more perfect knowledge of her allow us to learn and live Her virtues. To know Mary means to announce and give testimony to the world of her love so that she may become the Queen and the Mother of all humanity.

According to Kolbe, the entrustment to the Immaculata represents the summit of a relationship with the Virgin Mary that is not merely devotional, but radically affects spiritual life. Belonging to Mary is expressed by the external sign represented by the miraculous medal and above all by a missionary dimension that leads the members of the movement to carry out pastoral action for those who oppose the Church and those particularly in need of prayers and spiritual support.\textsuperscript{15}

The organization of the MI is designed and structured by Kolbe as follows:

"The MI-1 is the "Pia Unio," in the legal sense of the Code of Canon Law (cann. 700-707, 725), without a rigorous organization, but based on the registration card so anyone can easily become a member of it. The MI-2 is the "sodalitas" in the legal sense (the same canons of the code), with a clearly defined organization. I am of the opinion that those accepted into it should be carefully chosen. Its members could be the leaders of the MI-1; during the monthly meetings, primarily devoted to humble prayer to the Immaculata, they could take note of the activities and examine the means to employ for further actions.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{14} It is the magazine \textit{Knight of the Immaculata} in Polish.
\textsuperscript{16} \textit{KW} 381. The same structure designed by Kolbe was confirmed by the 2015 General Statutes, which read as follows: Following the directives of Father Kolbe, in the MI the entrustment/consecration can be lived out in a total and unconditional way:
1. Individually and spontaneously, according to the \textit{original program} drafted by the founder himself: “I. Total
The third degree, then does not limit itself only to some acts “quod zelo et prudentiae uniuscuiusque commendatur”: there are no limits to zeal, as in the MI.1. Nor does it restrict one only within the limits of some statute; one gives oneself to the Immaculata and works for her with no limits. This is MI-3.\textsuperscript{17}

Maximilian provides three degrees of membership to the association that we could schematize as follows:

- \textit{MI-1}: consists of those who commit themselves to live in a personal capacity according to the style and purpose of the movement. In this case the members do not follow the typical rules of the associative realities, but individually express a journey characterized by the entrustment to the Immaculata and by the mission to conquer the hearts of men to her.

- \textit{MI-2}: the members of this level follow a community journey, with the typical rules of a statute, with a capillary organization and a series of rules that govern its activity. These are realities well structured by internal laws and a proper government.

- \textit{MI-3}: at this level the members of the movement have no limits in entrusting themselves to the Immaculata and show their willingness to perform heroic deeds.

Regarding the territorial expansion, the \textit{MI} can be global, national and local, depending on its extension. Maximilian thinks of a movement that can extend to the whole earth and that has cells spread even at the regional level.\textsuperscript{18}

He immediately thinks of a pastoral reality that can embrace all of humanity. Here are his remarkable words: "Let the MI be less “universalis” than “transcendentalis,” that is to say, it should not present itself as one more organization among the many that already exist, but rather deeply permeate all organizations."\textsuperscript{19}

The saint thinks of an association that embraces the whole world, precisely in a transcendental way: this means that its members are called to enter every social group of every nation to proclaim and give testimony of the Word of the Lord and the joy of belonging to the Immaculata.\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{17}KW 402.
\textsuperscript{18}Cf. SIMBULA, \textit{La Milizia dell’Immacolata}, 37-38.
\textsuperscript{19}KW 658.
\textsuperscript{20}Cf. SIMBULA, \textit{La Milizia dell’Immacolata}, 27.
2. The extension of the MI in the world

After the foundation period, the MI developed quickly all over the world, especially in the countries in which the Friars Minor Conventuals operate. In 1938, in the aforementioned propaganda leaflet, St. Maximilian admits that the members of the association already exceed one million, although it is not yet known all over the globe.\textsuperscript{21} Poland and Italy are the first irradiation centers, followed by other nations with the result that progressively the movement is universally known up to exceed the confines of convents. More and more lay people are starting to register and to work effectively when Maximilian is still alive.\textsuperscript{22}

The Militia of the Immaculata spread quickly and in a pervasive way, first of all in Poland, after the return of Fr. Kolbe. The first seat to be established is that of Krakow, a place where the saint live immediately after the Roman experience. On December 20, 1919, the first members joined the association. In January 1922 the first edition of the \textit{Ricerz Niepokalanej} was published. It is worth mentioning the great pastoral action of a young and zealous friar, who died in very young age, the Venerable Fr. Venanzio Katarzyniec (1889-1921), excellent propagator of the movement, which is soon founded in other centers, such as Poznan, Wilno, Grodno, Vale, Warsaw, etc.\textsuperscript{23}

Even in Italy the association receives a lot of support. What happens in Assisi, whose bishop, Msgr. Giuseppe Placido Nicolini, first entered his name in the register of members on December 1, 1930 is very significant. In 1928, however, the headquarters of Gubbio, the first to be created, after the primary, is already present and operating. Afterwards, on December 23, 1932, Osimo hosted a center for the knights of the Immaculata. Later, the \textit{MI} expands throughout the country with increasingly numerous and pastoral active presences.\textsuperscript{24}

The movement spreads in many other nations. In Romania, before the second world war and thanks to the co-founder p. Pietro Pal, there are 34 offices. In Slovenia, the first presence was established on March 14, 1938, in the college of Sts. Peter and Paul in the locality of Ptuy. This is followed by Croatia, which is hosting the association from December 30, 1938. There is a wide spread throughout the European continent, where many believers welcome with enthusiasm and dedication the Kolbean proposal.\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{21} Cf. \textit{KW 1226}.
\textsuperscript{22} Cf. \textit{KW 1222}.
\textsuperscript{23} Cf. S. BOTTICELLA, \textit{La Milizia dell’Immacolata. Sintesi storica di cinquant’anni di vita (1917-1941)}; Roma 1971, 35-42.
\textsuperscript{24} Cf. \textit{Ivi}, 25-29.
\textsuperscript{25} Cf. \textit{Ivi}, 43-46.
Antonio Blasucci highlights that in 1936 the branch offices around the world amounted to 46; in 1941, at the death of the founder, there were a total of 69 offices, 38 of which in Italy alone. Two other important events indicate the growing diffusion of the movement: the approval of the updated Statutes (March 24, 1942) by the Vicariate of Rome, and the establishment of a General Executive Council (April 16-21, 1942) based in the same place of the primary. On the twenty-fifth anniversary of the foundation, the Minister General of the Friars Minor Conventual and Supreme Moderator of the MI, p. Beda Hess, sends a circular letter to all the "Knights" inciting them to an even more tireless and generous commitment.\(^{26}\)

Another event that indicates the worldwide growth of the Militia is represented by the growing number of the Cities of the Immaculata all over the world. Besides the two Kolbean foundations of Niepokalanów (Poland) and Mugenzai No Sono (Japan), other similar institutions arise, dedicated to the apostolate through the press and, in general, to the support of the MI activity. Of course, the growing reputation for holiness of the martyr of Auschwitz acts as a "flywheel" to this phenomenon.\(^{27}\)

In November 1949, Marytown, the city of Mary, was founded in the State of Illinois, U.S.; in 1953, the activities of the Little City of Mary Immaculate begin in Manchester, England; in 1956 the Piccola Città dell’Immacolata di Fatima was born in Genoa, on the slopes of the Mount Fasce; in 1960 the Citade Immaculate was founded in Santo Andrè, in the State of São Paulo, Brazil; on December 15, 1961, the foundation stone of the Cittadella dell’Immacolata was laid in Rome, Italy. These are only some of the many Marian cities that are established in the world by the Friars Minor Conventual for a MI apostolate in good Kolbean style. The proliferation of these Marian structures indicates the considerable growth of the movement.\(^{28}\)

In the following tables,\(^{29}\) based on a research carried out by Antonio Blasucci, we indicate the number of offices in the world in 1965:

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\(^{26}\) Cf. A. BLASUCCI, L’Immacolata e la sua Milizia, Napoli 1965, 74. According to Kolbe’s intention, the primary seat is that of the International College of the Friars Minor Conventual in Rome (cf. KW 42, 44). Tradition has confirmed this option later. With the General Statutes of 1997 and 2015 this denomination decays because the International Center is established in the place of the foundation of the MI, in Via S. Teodoro, 42, Rome.

\(^{27}\) Cf. Ivi, 89-90.

\(^{28}\) Cf. Ivi, 90-99. About the institution of the Cities of the Immaculata the study of Fr. Domanski, former International Director of the Movement, is very helpful (Cf. G. M. DOMANSKI, Le Niepokalanów nel mondo, in Miles Immaculatae 13 (1977) 252-270.

\(^{29}\) Cf. Ivi, 100.
From the tables previously exposed, we can see how the MI is characterized by a widespread diffusion in Europe, particularly in Italy and Poland, the places where the association has developed since its origins. In the other continents, the presences are quite small, although it is noticeable that the movement is under development. In the first years, the Militia of the Immaculata was added to the pastoral activities of the Friars Minor Conventual and that is why its propagation takes place mainly in the places where they are present. After the Second Vatican Council, with the opening to
lay sanctity, there is a multiplication of seats all over the world, not only where the confreres of Kolbe are present and working: therefore, we are seeing a development of major proportions.\textsuperscript{30}

This widespread development is due to the very successful impact of the movement in the various nations. For example, in Italy from 1945 to 1968 the local centers are so numerous that they will give rise to regional centers. Thus, in every Italian region there is a distinct MI organization. In the same period, in the other European realities, there is an increase of offices in the States in which the Kolbean institution is already present and the birth of new ones, such as those born in Belgium, Sweden, Malta, Germany, Switzerland and Portugal (here were the Salesians who founded it).\textsuperscript{31}

Even in non-European countries there is a substantial growth of the movement, which reaches traditionally Islamic nations (Turkey). It grows stronger in North America (we point out the birth of centers in Canada and the increase of those in the U.S.A) and is consolidates in Central and South America (Mexico, Uruguay and Brazil count many newly established centers).\textsuperscript{32}

Asia (China, Indonesia, India, South Vietnam) and Africa (Zambia) are not exempt from this phenomenon of expansion because in these continents the MI raises a truly relevant and ever-increasing interest. Also many Christians of Australia adhere to the proposal of a Christian-Marian journey in this Kolbean movement.\textsuperscript{33}

We recall that in the spring of 1965 the magazine \textit{Miles Immaculatae} began its publishing activity thanks to a pool of qualified scholars such as Fr. Antonio Di Monda (MI National Director in Italy), and teachers of the Pontifical Theological Faculty "S. Bonaventure" in Rome. It has a scientific approach and deepens Marian and Kolbean spirituality themes, as well as important ecclesial and theological events.\textsuperscript{34}

Another important aspect of the history of the association founded by Kolbe, is the birth of Institutes of consecrated life of Kolbean inspiration, that is to say foundations that, among other aspects of their special charisma, have the objective of offering their support to the Militia. This is the case of the \textit{Franciscan Sisters of the Militia of the Immaculata}, a religious institution founded in Japan by Fr. Miecislao Mirochna OFMConv on December 8, 1949, who takes care of the assistance of abandoned children and the works related to the MI. The sisters are now operating in Poland, whose pastoral zeal is admirable. This is the case of the Secular Institute of the \textit{Missionaries of the Immaculata Father Kolbe}, founded by Fr. Luigi Faccenda OFMConv, on October 11, 1965. This

\textsuperscript{30} Cf. Ivi, 101-105.
\textsuperscript{32} Cf. Ivi, 206-224
\textsuperscript{33} Cf. Ivi, 225-229.
\textsuperscript{34} Cf. Ivi, 94-95.
women's institution stands out in time for its activity alongside the Militia of the Immaculata, giving to it the first President not belonging to the Conventual Order, that is Raffaella Aguzzoni, who recently died during her meritorious and innovative mandate.\(^{35}\)

With the beatification (October 17, 1971) and the canonization (October 10, 1982) of Kolbe, the increase of the seats and the members of the \(MI\) it's really significant. Moreover, the growing missionary commitment of the Friars Minor Conventuals in many cases takes place through Kolbean methodologies (for example making use of the mass media for evangelization) or by naming new foundations to the saint. This leads to a vast knowledge of Kolbe and of the association he founded, which spreads in all latitudes. More and more lay people become part of the movement, which also extends to regions where the Conventuals are not present. The prophecy of Kolbe, which had foreseen a universal dimension for the \(MI\), far beyond the pastoral realities of the Order, has come true. This leads to a great expansion dynamic that requires a revision of the legal system that governs this institution.

Now the characteristics of the Militia of the Immaculata have changed compared to the beginning. The Friars Minor Conventual serve as excellent guardians, but now the lay members are certainly the majority and a new legal organization that takes into account the innovations brought by the Second Vatican Council is needed.

For these reasons the General Statutes are prepared and approved by the Pontifical Council for the Laity on November 8, 1975 and renewed, \textit{ad experimentum usque ad accommodationem novo Codici juris canonici}, on December 20, 1980. With the decree of the aforementioned Vatican dicastery of October 16, 1997, the Militia of the Immaculata is raised to an international public association according to canon 312, I, 1° of the Code of Canon Law. This is an epochal change due to the considerable increase in the participation of the laity and the internationalization of the movement.

The Church recognizes the \(MI\) as a universal and international association, after taking note of its worldwide diffusion, according to what Kolbe himself states: "The Militia of the Immaculata, as we can see, is a global vision of Catholic life in a new form, consisting in the bond with the Immaculata, our universal Mediatrix before Jesus."\(^{36}\)

\(^{35}\) Cf. \textit{Ivi}, 289-321. In this context we have to recall the \textit{Missionaries Knights of the Immaculata}, founded by the Friars Conventuals Francesco Randazzo and Valeriano Valeriani, born from the unification of two distinct institutes (the first from Sicily and the second from Puglia) belonging to the two mentioned founders. Also worthy of mention is the Institute of the Missionaries of the Immaculata Father Kolbe, an institute founded under the evangelization of Fr. Luigi Faccenda and operating in Brazil. There are many other groups of consecrated life linked to St. Maximilian and his apostolic style which, however, do not maintain a stable relation with the Militia of the Immaculata. Kolbean-inspired Institutes represent a very important aspect of the life of the "Militia universe", which assumes a particular perspective inside them.

\(^{36}\) \textit{KW} 1220.
According to the General Statutes, this Kolbean foundation is a Marian ecclesial movement, that is, an institution well rooted in the Church, which offers its own spiritual and apostolic contribution to all believers, to all humanity, and whose spirituality is founded on the dogma of the Immaculate Conception and its mode of implementation is based on the example of S. Maximilian. The entrustment to the Immaculata is essential for the members of the association, called to express an always meaningful and innovative missionary experience, following the footsteps of the founder. This journey requires continuous and consistent training. Who adheres to the MI is called to gradually learn its contents through a constant updating of his/her theological knowledge and with the progressive renewal of his/her capacity to express a theological experience. The new legislation of the association basically does not change its contents, but adapts the terminology and organization on the basis of the post-conciliar ecclesial journey and the characteristics that a universal movement should have. 

The constant growth and the need for formation impose a revision of the General Statutes, which must be further adapted to the Church's journey and to the necessities of an ever better pastoral impact in the light of the new evangelization. For this reason the new Statutes, promulgated by decree of March 25, 2015, are approved by the Pontifical Council for the Laity. Actually, this is the revision of the previous statutes which, in substance, are been confirmed. The MI thus looks to the future and is preparing to live new challenges.

3. MI future perspectives in the light of the new evangelization

Currently the MI is widespread throughout the world and expresses distinct characteristics according to the nation in which it is rooted and to the spiritual and apostolic tradition developed there. Historically in Poland and in Italy the movement exists from its first hour and preserves a very organized and widespread structure that allows a valid evangelization in the local Churches where it is very present. The offices guarantee a valid formation to the members of the association who, in turn, engage in catechesis and initiatives related to the printing and distribution of the Knight of the Immaculata, the historic kolbean magazine.

38 It must be said that after Maximilian Kolbe’s canonization, theological conferences on his figure and on MI proliferated throughout the world. These are contributions of high academic value, generally organized by the Pontifical Theological Faculty “S. Bonaventure” (where a Kolbean Chair was created) and by the MI International Center, which offer an important contribution to the placing of the whole movement in the ecclesial landscape.
In every European nation, there are structures and members of this Marian institution and here we note the very dynamic activities of the knights of Spain, the Czech Republic, Luxembourg and Croatia. The place in which the Kolbe-style apostolate has become more widespread is Brazil, particularly in the district of San Bernardo do Campo. In this area the MI animates a very widespread and appreciated radio station, a television station and other works that use the mass media. Here Kolbe's message has taken root very well and takes hold especially among young people. In the Brazilian land, there is also another very important center in that of Brasilia, where a City of the Immaculata exists and operates. We also report very dynamic presences in Colombia and Bolivia.

The presence of the movement in the U.S.A is very significant. In every State, there are very active places, especially in the pastoral care of young people and prisoners. In Asia the MI is a pastoral reality that "takes root" in a relevant way in South Korea, India, Japan and the Philippines: in this wide area there is a lot of knights who carry out wide range evangelization activities.

The association is spreading a lot in Africa. In addition to the "traditional" presences of Zambia and Kenya, it has just been established in Burkina Faso and Nigeria and has been operating in the Ivory Coast for years, with a large and qualified lay presence, even without the presence of Friars Minor Conventual. There is no lack of seats and knights in Australia, where a media apostolate is well under way and is widely acclaimed. We have listed the most numerous presences and the most deeply rooted apostolate, but we can say that everywhere, in every nation there is the presence of the Militia of the Immaculata who perpetuates Kolbean message and apostolate by any means necessary.

A perspective that involves the present MI is undoubtedly that of enhancing and actualizing the charism of St. Maximilian. The saint left an indelible mark in the Franciscan world and in the Church. His message and his testimony should be rediscovered on the basis of the needs of the contemporary man and ecclesial family. The mission and martyrdom of St. Maximilian still exert great appeal today and it is important that the movement founded by him rediscovers the supporting elements of its theological structure, planning how they can be introduced into contemporary reality. 39

The Kolbean inheritance spirituality of the entrustment to the Immaculata is still very strong today. The association founded by him is called to discover every day the joy and the strength to belong to Mary, which means to walk illuminated by her maternal love and her luminous example of sequela. Placing himself in her hands, St. Maximilian performed extraordinary apostolic works, demonstrating how her contribution to the life of every man is fundamental. Moreover, the saint invites all kinds of missionary activity to depend on prayer: proclamation and testimony are based on

prayer and the capacity to constantly entrust ourselves to the Immaculata: it is the triumph of the interior life which results in tireless and solid evangelization. The actual MI is called to give light and strength to the great values of the heart, which are the foundation of all its activity. Among them there is certainly the ability to live and work in communion: every national reality has its characteristics, but the movement works with harmony and effectiveness only if the hearts of all members are beating in unison, only if it gives a special value to a true family spirit.40

In this sense, Kolbe’s words are really significant:

"One of the means that greatly enhances the results of a soul’s efforts is the union between souls like these, with the purpose of directing themselves toward a common goal in concerted action. That is why the association of the Militia of the Immaculata was born, whose aim, even in its simplest legal form, which requires no rigorous organization, makes it possible for souls not only to gain the indulgences granted by the Apostolic See, but also to deepen the ideal of the Militia of the Immaculata and to apply it to the normal circumstances of ordinary life. Besides, through the National Center, members can entertain a mutual exchange of points of view ad intentions."41

Kolbe, a man of communion, invites all those who follow a journey that recalls his style, to work in concord and harmony, because each member of the association understands the value and strength of a common journey that becomes an evangelizing force and a motive of significant Christian testimony.

The MI is called to discover more and more its missionary vocation. Even today the mission for which it was born is valid: to bring to humanity the love and light of Christ and the precious presence of the Immaculata. At present, man needs to be enlightened by the Christian message and to know the maternal charity of the Virgin Mary. This is why the association is called to an evangelization that employs all possible means to reach hearts and, as Pope Francis would say, the peripheries of the world.

Indeed,

"A Church which “goes forth” is a Church whose doors are open. Going out to others in order to reach the fringes of humanity does not mean rushing out aimlessly into the world. Often it is better simply to slow down, to put aside our eagerness in order to see and listen to others, to stop rushing from one thing to another and to remain with someone who has faltered along the way".42

41 KW 1329.
42 FRANCIS, Evangelii Gaudium, 46.
Pope Francis’s words represent a splendid stimulus in seeking those who live oppressed in the suburbs of the world and give them relief with words and deeds. After all, this is the style taught by Kolbe, always aimed at identifying suffering humanity, both in the spirit and in the body, and in activating ourselves to offer an effective contribution to their well-being. Today, the Pope's invitations must represent today a great stimulus for the whole association.

The MI is called to continue on the valorization of the laity, who already today play an important role, but who are called in the future to give even more for the performance of the mission entrusted to them. They will allow the further development of the phenomenon of internationalization in those areas in which the confreres of Kolbe are not present or where the religious can not enter. Moreover, the knights from the whole world are called not to forget the importance of a continuous growth in the use of technology, even the most sophisticated, for the proclamation and testimony of the Gospel. These are the major challenges that must be met with the same conviction as Maximilian.43

Here are some meaningful expressions of John Paul II, who, during a meeting with the MI members, on October 18, 1981, states:

"I exhort you therefore to live this ideal of yours with more and more fervent commitment. In our society, your consecration to Mary Immaculate must make you serene, confident and courageous witnesses. Like Father Maximilian you are passionately in love with truth. The Church today essentially needs unity in truth. In fact, it is truth that gives the courage for great decisions, heroic choices, definitive dedication. It is truth that gives the strength to live difficult virtues, the evangelical beatitudes, youthful purity, and consecrated and conjugal chastity! It is knowledge and love of truth which gives rise to priestly, religious and missionary vocations and which moves to charity, to the extent of self-sacrifice, as Father Maximilian did!”44

The association is called to perpetuate St. Maximilian’s charism through its own work, following his example in manifesting courage and heroism in proclaiming and giving the testimony of the evangelical truths, which lead inexorably to express a charity that comes to the gift of one's own life, just as it happened in the spiritual experience of the martyr of Auschwitz. St. John Paul II’s words can easily act as a manifesto and encouragement for the future of the Militia of the Immaculata.

In conclusion, we can affirm that after its first hundred years of life a distinctly missionary future awaits the MI. This is the way that will characterize the MI in the coming years, with its founder’s enthusiastic and innovative style and the originality that each member will be able to give

43 Cf. QUAGLIO, Evangelizzare con i mass-media, 48-51.
44 JOHN PAUL II, Letter to the Militia of Mary Immaculate, October 18, 1981, 3.
to the whole movement. To be alive, credible and coherent the association needs to choose the path of an apostolate that tries to reach every heart in the right way.\textsuperscript{45}

**Conclusion**

The MI has a simple and effective, but very ambitious project: to pursue the holiness of all! This happens by praying, working and offering in order to encourage greater fervor in believers in Christ engaged in testimony and evangelization. This means promoting the possibility of a spiritual journey in the Lord under the custody of the Immaculata. This is the precious spiritual heritage of this association that should be appreciated and enhanced in this centenary year. In this Jubilee time the theological reflection about and inside the Militia of the Immaculata rediscovers ever more the missionary dimension, as a central element of its vocation.

These are the words of the International President in presenting the celebrations program for the 100th anniversary of the association:

"A decisive aspect of the life of MI is represented by the mission, a dimension that has always characterized this movement and which represents its past and future. The mission was, and still is, a priority aspect in the journey of the Kolbean association and that’s the reason why the journey made in these hundred years, but also the future prospects in good Kolbean style, should be included in the missionary perspective [...]. Apostolic work can not have limits of space and time, it is carried out everywhere and with the maximum participation of people who share the same ideal and the same evangelizing purpose. The whole world is a land of mission, for which the best theological and cultural formation is necessary in order to allow an excellent impact with the recipients of the Gospel message. The missionary is he who thinks and works great, sustained by divine grace. Kolbe dreams big and for this reason the MI and his other apostolic initiatives are born with a broad spectrum purpose and in a universal dimension.\textsuperscript{46}

The mission is a priority that must motivate the whole life of the association in order to find new ways of evangelization that bring to the world the love of Mary and offer to every man/woman solid contents for his/her own sanctification, with the ardor and docility to the action of the Spirit that Kolbe passed down.

In this sense, the expectations proposed by Fr. Marco Tasca are really valuable:

\textsuperscript{45} Immaculatae 67 (2011) 62-67.
\textsuperscript{45} Cf. Di Muro, Spendersi per amore, 111-116.
\textsuperscript{46} R. Di Muro, Cento anni di missione. Un anno per riflettere, per ripartire con fiducia e forza, http://www.mi-international.org/centenario.html
"We live this Kolbe jubilee year with great interior joy and with the utmost tension in listening. We have a wonderful spiritual heritage, which can be the basis for new itineraries suggested by the Spirit in favor of the Church and of humanity, that the Order and the MI, in deep communion, wish to promote. Like Kolbe, beyond Kolbe, with the creativity suggested by the Spirit, we are invited to discover new ways of mission that can speak to the hearts of the men and women of our time." 47

The MI is therefore projected towards the search for ever new and effective ways to make its journey adherent to the divine plan and to the teaching of the founder. The mission represents the root and the challenge for the future, the entrustment to the Immaculata, the serene certainty that every work of the movement will take place under her protection. Marian spirituality and apostolic tension are the two pillars of the history of this association, but also the strengths that will animate the second centenary now started.

It seems significant to conclude our contribution with the words of greeting addressed by John Paul II to the members of the association on October 18, 1981:

"Be strong in faith and live with enthusiasm the commitments of the Militia of Mary Immaculate, to which you belong, following the teaching and examples of Father Maximilian Kolbe. “To suffer, work, love and rejoice”: this was his program and the summary of his life. May it be so also for you, with the help of the Blessed Virgin. And may my blessing, which I impart with great affection to you and to all the members of your Militia always accompany you.” 48

To suffer, work, love and rejoice is the way of the future MI which, under the impulsion of Kolbe’s testimony and the protection of the Immaculata, is beginning to face new challenges that will confirm its high martyrial and missionary vocation.

47 TASCA, San Massimiliano Kolbe, 3.