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Fire of Love: Lessons from St. Maximilian Kolbe

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There is no saint that has a greater impact upon my spiritual life than St. Maximilian Kolbe. This fact is ironic as early on in my conversion to Catholicism I did not like him at all. I thought he looked too stern in his pictures, and that he talked too much about the Immaculata, a title for the Blessed Virgin that I found rather weird.

Yet, God works in mysterious ways, and after reading the writings of St. Maximilian himself, I grew to love this saint profoundly. Now, I pore over his words of wisdom again and again (his writings are truly a spiritual education) and I have even named my young son after him.

There is so much more to St. Maximilian than his heroic death in Auschwitz, an event which was really but the crowning of an incredible life of heroic love for others. On this his feast day, I want to share some of the important lessons I have learned, as well as corresponding quotes, from this great man of God in the hope that it will inspire you to learn more about him yourself.

Mary, The Mother of Jesus and Our Mother

St. Maximilian lived and died for the Lady whom he loved, the Blessed Virgin Mary. Yet, it is impossible to understand his devotion to Mary without understanding what motivated it. To St. Maximilian, devotion to Mary was logical and necessary if one wanted to follow Christ. After all, our mission as Christians is to become “little Christs”, formed into the image of Jesus in a greater and greater way throughout our lives. And there is no better way to be formed into the image of Christ than to entrust ourselves to the Woman who literally formed Christ in her womb, the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Through her profoundly intimate relationship with the Holy Spirit, Mary brought forth Jesus Christ—God incarnate—into the world. Through her union with the Holy Spirit, this forming of Christ and bringing him into the world continues in you and I. If we want to truly become like Christ, we need to allow ourselves to be formed in the spiritual womb of Mary, by the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, into the image of the Son of God. There is no other way.

“In her womb the soul must be regenerated according to the form of Jesus Christ.”

“Through the Immaculate, we can become great saints, and what is more, in an easy way.”

“With the help of the Immaculate we are capable of everything.”

The Essence of Holiness is Obedience

It is tempting to think holiness consists in mysticism or incredible deeds or extended periods of prayer. We read the lives of the saints and think that to be holy, we must experience God in a direct and immediate way, or perhaps found a religious order, or maybe convert thousands in a far-flung jungle. But this is simply not the case. One of the most important lessons that St. Maximilian has taught me is that holiness is nothing more than obedience to the will of God in every circumstance of life.

“Christian perfection consists in the union of our will with the will of God.”

“Not in mortification, not in prayer, not in labor, not in rest, but in obedience is the essence and merit of holiness.”

“The essence of the love of God does not lie in affections or in sweet words, but solely in the will. If the soul perseveres decisively with its will fixed on holiness and love of God, although it does not experience the least feeling in its heart, let it be wholly convinced that it continually tends with rapid pace forward and ever pushes upward.”

“Do not forget that holiness consists not in extraordinary actions, but in performing your duties towards God, yourself, and others well.”

Sin Can Help Us Grow in Holiness

One of the truths I learned from St. Maximilian that has been most revolutionary to my

spiritual life is that sin can actually help us *advance* on the road to perfection. This is because the foundation of all holiness is humility, and nothing humbles us more than coming face to face with our own weakness. This is not to say that we should sin intentionally, but that we should never be discouraged when we do fall. St. Maximilian summarizes this idea in this now famous passage:

My beloved, may every fall, even if it is serious and habitual sin, always become for us a small step toward a higher degree of perfection. In fact, the only reason why the Immaculate permits us to fall is to cure us from our self-conceit, from our pride, to make us humble and thus make us docile to the divine graces.

The devil, instead, tries to inject in us discouragement and internal depression in those circumstances, which is, in fact, nothing else than our pride surfacing again. If we knew the depth of our poverty, we would not be at all surprised by our falls, but rather astonished, and we would thank God, after sinning, for not allowing us to fall even deeper and still more frequently.

Missionary Zeal

St. Maximilian lived with intensity. There was no lukewarmness or half-heartedness in him. His mission was to liberate as many souls as possible from sin and make them happy by uniting them to God by way of his Immaculate Mother. He was consumed by this desire and compelled by its urgency, and he inspired the same zeal for the salvation of souls everywhere he went.

It is not enough to become the Immaculate's within some defined limit. In every respect, we must desire to radiate her, so as to draw to her the souls of all others who are, will be, and might be—without restriction. In a word, we are to become hers, more and more ready to sacrifice self entirely for her, to the last drop of blood in the conquest of the whole world and every soul in particular—as soon as possible, as soon as possible, as soon as possible.

Love Everyone, Even Your Enemies

It can be very easy to love only those we like, or those who agree with us. It is human nature. As our Lord said, “For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?” Yet, selective love is not true Christian love. We are called to love everyone, no matter how morally wicked or distasteful to us. St. Maximilian lived in this way,

and his heart was so large it embraced the world. Here's how he described the love we must have:

We need to love our neighbor not just because he is pleasant or helpful or rich and influential or even because he shows us gratitude. These motives are too self-serving, unworthy of our Lady's Knights. Genuine love rises above creatures and soars up to God. In him, by him, and through him it loves all men, both good and wicked, friends and enemies. To all it stretches out a hand filled with love; it prays for all, suffers for all, wishes what is best for all, desires happiness for all—because that is what God wants.

Never Be Discouraged

In the Christian life, dark times will inevitably come. We will become weary, we will suffer, and we will feel overwhelmed. Yet, despite the darkness which sometimes envelopes us, St. Maximilian reminds us to never lose heart, to always be courageous, and to entrust everything to Mary, our good mother who is far more capable of helping us than we are of helping ourselves.

Let us let ourselves be led, then; let us not attempt to do more than that which [Mary] wills or more quickly. Let us let ourselves be carried by her; she will think of everything and take care of all our needs, of the soul and of the body.

Let us give every difficulty, every sorrow to her, and have confidence that she will take care of it better than we could. Peace then, peace, much peace in an unlimited confidence in her....

Above all, never let yourselves be troubled, never be frightened, never fear anything. The Immaculate, in fact, is she perhaps not aware of everything? If this were not the case, it would really be a problem.

A Man for Our Times

I could continue to share more, but instead I will encourage you to read St. Maximilian for yourself. His writings are simple and yet deeply profound, and he speaks with a wisdom that can come only from the Holy Spirit. Undoubtedly, his words will stir you to greater love for God, his Immaculate mother, and for all mankind

St. Maximilian lived in dark times and died in a very dark place, yet wherever he went he

radiated the light of God's love and mercy like a blazing torch. His life teaches us to entrust ourselves to our loving Mother, Mary Immaculate, and through her, to bring both our souls and the souls of others to the happiness of union with God. May we like him illumine the darkness of this world by the same fire of love.

St. Maximilian Kolbe, pray for us.

Further Reading:

[*The Kolbe Reader*](http://amzn.to/2fFeHdd) (<http://amzn.to/2fFeHdd>)

[*All for the Immaculata! Conferences of St. Maximilian Kolbe*](http://amzn.to/2vwAQ2X) (<http://amzn.to/2vwAQ2X>)

[*Aim Higher! Spiritual and Marian Reflections of St. Maximilian Kolbe*](http://amzn.to/2wIe1b9)

[Let Yourself Be Led By the Immaculate](http://amzn.to/2wIe1b9) (<http://amzn.to/2wIe1b9>)

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