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Father Kolbe and the bread of life

Beginning this month we will meditate on the gift of the Eucharist, the center of Father Kolbe's life. As always, we let ourselves be enlightened by the Word:

"When the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into boats and came to Capernaum looking for Jesus. And when they found him across the sea they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you get here?" Jesus answered them and said, "Amen, amen, I say to you, you are looking for me not because you saw signs but because you ate the loaves and were filled. Do not work for food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life which the Son of Man will give you." (Jn 6: 24-27)

The bottom line is clear: being hungry is a basic need of man. In the history of Israel this need was listened to by God who fed the people with manna in the desert. And today? Jesus answers: only he "who goes to Him and believes in Him" will find a full and definite answer to his hunger and thirst!

The Eucharist is fundamental in understanding the logic of "giving totally of one's self." From familiarity with God by having drunk of the chalice of his Love, is born energy capable of changing us and others. The Eucharist educates us in the difficult art of giving. It's the Eucharist that gives birth to a mentality of welcoming and a culture of giving.

Saint Maximilian learned the art of charity at the foot of the altar. At the school of the Eucharist, Kolbe doesn't only offer *something*, but "breaks" his life for others and is broken to pieces, showing Auschwitz the greatest love. "Eucharist is the strength of the soul."¹ The sacrament of the Eucharist brought forth all his strength and efficaciousness; Maximilian Kolbe gave great importance to the preparation before Holy Mass and the thanksgiving afterwards. He said that "we can and must anticipate and lengthen (our preparation and thanksgiving) with the good fulfillment of one's duties to give joy to the heart of Jesus."² "To receive communion well, it is necessary to prepare for a half day and give thanks for a half day!"³ His thanksgiving after Mass was no less than 20 minutes and was totally immersed in this silent adoration." He implored his confreres to "give thanks" for benefits received, the greatest of all being the coming of the eternal and omnipotent God into a human and fragile heart.⁵ We know Father Kolbe's prayer to the Lord Jesus in November of 1929:

"You remained on this miserable earth in the most holy and beyond admirable Sacrament of the altar and now you come to me and unite yourself closely to me by means of nourishment...As of now your Blood flows in mine, your soul, O incarnate God, permeates my soul, it gives it strength and nourishment..."⁶

In the conference of March 10, 1940 he tells his brothers:

“Our soul becomes a living tabernacle, and more also. Because the soul of Jesus unites itself with ours and becomes the soul of our soul. It’s impossible to understand all this, we can only feel its effects.”

Father Kolbe thanked God for the graces received because “our gratitude increases graces and to receive even more we must pray very much, above all after communion.” Again he’d say: “After Holy Communion tell Jesus what makes you suffer, ask for counsel: it’s the thanksgiving.”⁷ In his meditations he often repeated to himself: “Commit to the maximum in pleasing Jesus as a preparation and thanksgiving.”⁸

He never neglected to celebrate Holy Mass. He celebrated, according to witnesses, with ardor, passion, and joy. But this joy would turn to sadness when a major impediment would occur. With what disappointment he had to renounce celebrating Mass because of illness in Krakow from January 18 to February 3, 1922 or later on at Niepokalanow. There were other reasons, like the difficulty of finding a church, or in the long trips crossing Siberia by train from June 26 to July 3, 1930.

The Eucharist is the love that is inflamed for the life of the world. We can see this same love for the world in the intention of Fr. Kolbe’s first Mass, celebrated in the church of Sant’Andrea delle Fratte on the altar of the apparition of the Immaculata. He didn’t celebrate for his parents, relatives, or the many who led him to the altar, as new priests normally do. Rather, he prayed for the conversion of Sara Petkowitsch, for schismatic non-Catholics, and the freemasons.⁹ In the memorial card that he distributed after Mass, he eloquently showed how much more precious a gift the Eucharist was for them. On the card was an image of the Eucharist, represented by the chalice with the Host in the hands of the angels and underneath this symbol were the words: “Here is the goodness of our divine Savior and his love for men! If the angels could be jealous of men, they would be for one thing: Holy Communion.”¹⁰ And again: “What grace, what dignity to be able to receive Holy Communion.”

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For the Community

⁴KW 982.

²Cf. KW 987 D.

³KW 962.

⁴Pos. p.430.

⁵Cf. KW 41.

⁶KW 1145.

⁷KW 962.

⁸Ref. KW 987D.

⁹KW 1336.

¹⁰Ref. December 18, 1938.