

Editor's Notes
The Heart of a Catechetical Priest
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The Lord continues to send priests to serve in his Church. The latest figures from the Vatican Yearbook show a slight increase in 2009 over the 2008 figures worldwide for candidates to the priesthood, and the whole period from 2000 onwards is also one of stability, with a slight increase in numbers. Globally, also, the percentage of the world population who are Catholic continues to rise (it now stands at 17.4%). We can praise God for this, not because we are interested in numbers for their own sake, but because each number represents a person, precious to the Father.

An incomparable response

What, then, is a priest? The answer was given to us existentially by St Maximilian Kolbe. When this friar martyr of Auschwitz was asked why he wished to take the place of a Polish father and husband, Francis Gajowniczek, in the punishment bunkers where camp inmates were starved to death, Maximilian Kolbe gave only one reason: 'I am a Catholic priest'. Pope Paul VI called this an 'incomparable' response. The response came, he said, 'from a heart trained to give itself'. And is not a Catholic priest, Pope Paul asks, a 'second Christ', who is the redeeming Victim of mankind? 'What a glory it is for us priests, and what a lesson...to find such a splendid exemplification of our consecration and of our mission!' Maximilian Kolbe provides us with an outstanding manifestation of the very heart of Catholic priesthood.

This saint of the twentieth century is also an inspiring figure for all involved in catechesis since a passion for the communication of the Faith governed the whole of his life. As many readers will know, in the forests on the edge of Warsaw, Maximilian founded what he called the 'City of the Immaculate'. In time, over 750 brothers came to live there, each of them a specialist in the field of modern communications. A radio station was established there in due course, accompanying the printing work of nine journals that was carried out.

Patient restoration

Cardinal Newman, in his *Historical Sketches*, provides us with a beautiful portrait of those in the Church in a much earlier age, when she was ravaged by incessant waves of barbarism, who applied themselves to the work of patiently rebuilding culture. The description he gives could be applied to Maximilian's work:

'It was a restoration rather than a visitation, correction, or conversion. The new world which he helped to create was a growth rather than a structure. Silent men were observed about the country, or discovered in the forest, digging, clearing, and building; and other silent men, not seen, were sitting in the cold cloister, tiring their eyes, and keeping their attention on the stretch, while they painfully deciphered and copied and re-copied the manuscripts which they had saved. There

was no one that “contended , or cried out,” or drew attention to what was going on; but by degrees the woody swamp became a hermitage, a religious house, a farm, an abbey, a village, a seminary, a school of learning, and a city.’

And under Maximilian and his friars there was indeed a remarkable growth, as the Faith was communicated far and wide. This editor of *The Sower* finds new hope every time he reviews the circulation figures of Maximilian's main magazine, *The Knight of the Immaculate* - through sheer hard work, combined with daring and ingenuity, and led by the generous grace of God, by the outbreak of World War II the number of copies being printed stood at almost a million, the magazine having begun in obscurity in the middle of a European and American financial depression.

True progress

But Maximilian would never let his friars forget that the growth of the Kingdom of God is a thing unseen and secret. True progress, he would insist, consists in the love and service of God growing in our hearts. For priests, for catechists, indeed for every Christian, there is a reminder here of the priority that the Church has always accorded to the contemplative life. In contemplation we find ‘a communion of love bearing Life for the multitude’ (CCC 2719). Authentic ministry, whether it be that of priest or lay catechist, is always a matter of contemplation finding expression in action. The Word spoken to others is first received into the heart. The primary duty of the priest is ‘the proclamation of the gospel of God to all’ (Vatican II, *Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests*, 4), and this proclamation becomes deeply fruitful to the extent that it overflows from a heart that abides ‘in the dwelling place of the Lord’ (CCC 2711).

It is Our Lady, as *Theotokos*, as God-bearer, who embodies in her own life this truth of the Gift of the divine Word flowing from receptivity, and it is no accident that Maximilian Kolbe saw his life as a matter of giving every ounce of his energy and every last drop of his blood to gain ‘the whole world for the Immaculate Mother of God.’