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St. Maximilian, Pray for Us

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

In the year 295, the 21-year-old son of a Roman veteran publicly refused to be drafted into the Roman army. As a result, the young man was arrested and brought to trial. His testimony was written down in a document called the *Passio* and later recited during Mass throughout the Church as an example of true Christian discipleship. His life and death became one of the great witnesses in the early Church. We need to reclaim his courage and testimony (which was meticulously recorded) as we try to stand up today against the U.S. war machine.

Maximilian preceded saints like Sebastian and Martin of Tours and modern-day martyrs such as Ben Salmon, **Sophie Scholl** and **Franz Jagerstatter***. From Maximilian to Franz Jagerstatter, these witnesses gave their lives to the truth that we are not allowed to kill, no matter how noble the cause, no matter urgent the political crisis, no matter what the empire, the junta, or the government orders.

"I cannot serve," Maximilian told the Roman court in the town of Theveste, Numidia, according to the ancient documents. "I cannot do evil. I will not be a soldier of this world. I am a soldier of Christ."

"What harm do soldiers do?" the proconsul asked.

"You know well enough!" Maximilian answered.

The proconsul then ordered Maximilian to wear the emperor's badge -- a leaden seal that soldiers and citizens wore around their necks. Maximilian regarded the Roman seal as idolatrous, and so he refused. He said that because of his baptism, he wore the "seal" of Christ, and that the emperor's seal would deface his baptismal seal.

The proconsul then argued that other Christians had joined the Roman army, trying to use that fact to prove that Christians could follow Christ and fight for Caesar as well.

"That is their business," Maximilian replied non-judgmentally.

"Maximilian has refused the military oath through impiety," the proconsul said as he sentenced Maximilian. "He is to be beheaded." Maximilian was immediately executed and his body was buried in Carthage in North Africa. The date was March 12, 295. Maximilian's refusal occurred on the eve of the Diocletian persecution at the beginning of the fourth century, when Christians were routinely exiled, arrested, jailed, tortured, and executed.

Maximilian's holy resistance and martyrdom before the Roman proconsul offers several lessons for us in the American empire.

First, Maximilian exemplifies the absolute refusal to support war, regardless of the consequences. He pointed to the bottom line of the Gospel of Jesus: We are not allowed to kill. We cannot fight for any army. We have been disarmed and called to the life of nonviolence. Maximilian is the patron of conscientious objectors to war. Following his Gospel logic, I believe every Christian must be a conscientious objector to war. No Christian should join the army, the navy, the air force or the marines. No Christian can work for the Pentagon, its weapons manufacturers, or its nuclear laboratories. No Christian student can join ROTC because its oath pledges "to destroy the enemies of the U.S.," contrary to Jesus' commandment to love our enemies.

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Second, Maximilian exemplifies absolute obedience to the nonviolent Jesus, even to the point of death. Maximilian reminds us that we place our allegiance in Christ, not in our government, its leaders, or its military forces. We do what Christ says, not what the draft board or the president or the judge says. We do not allow imperial leaders to explain to us the Gospel or discipleship or morality. Even if we are threatened with imprisonment, poverty, or ridicule, we refuse to fight. We are not soldiers of this world. We are nonviolent soldiers of the nonviolent Christ.

Maximilian reminds us of the words of Jesus as he faced condemnation and execution before the Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate. "My kingdom does not belong to this world. If my kingdom did belong to this world," Jesus said, "my attendants would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Judeans. But as it is, my kingdom is not here" (John 18:36-37).

Maximilian prefigures the testimony of St. Thomas More before he was executed, when he told the judge,

"As a Christian, I wish none harm. I think none harm. I say none harm. I do none harm."

Third, Maximilian's example summons us to reject idolatry as he did by refusing to wear the emperor's seal. He calls us to place our trust and security in the living God and to obey the teachings of Christ even if it costs our lives. This means that we no longer pledge our allegiance to America or its idols, but to Jesus Christ. From now on, we, too, have been "sealed" at baptism with perpetual service to Jesus, and we will never break that seal. We do not worship false gods or trust in our weapons for security. Our lives are focused solely on the Living God and the Holy Christ. We place our trust and allegiance in Christ. As Dorothy Day explained, once we render to God what truly belongs to God, we realize that there is nothing left for Caesar, his idols, his generals, his judges, or his warmakers.

Fourth, Maximilian could have run away and saved himself, but instead, he stood up publicly and proclaimed his allegiance to Christ. He offers a bold public witness for the nonviolent Jesus. His example calls us to stand up publicly and to proclaim our allegiance to the nonviolent Christ, to become public witnesses of Gospel nonviolence. Today, many people talk about Jesus but ignore his strict nonviolence to the point that wars, bombing raids, and injustices are commonly committed in his name. Like Maximilian, we, too, must not run away, be silent, or avoid controversy. We have to speak out against imperial warmaking, resist the culture of violence, obey the nonviolence of Jesus, and let our lives be disrupted.

"The fruits of this good work will be multiplied a hundredfold," Maximilian said as they dragged him away. "May I welcome you into heaven and glorify God with you!"

In the end, Maximilian forgave the judge and his executioner. Today he challenges us to forgive those who hurt us, persecute us, or would kill us. He invites us to take heart in the knowledge that if we follow Jesus on the path of nonviolence to the cross, we also will follow him into the new life of resurrection, where one day, we, too, will welcome others home. If we refuse to be soldiers of this world, like Maximilian, our lives will bear the good fruit of peace. As a result of our public witness, one day, our lives will bear good fruit and war, poverty, injustice, and nuclear weapons will be abolished.

[**Editor's Note: In a decree issued June 1, Pope Benedict XVI formally recognized the martyrdom Franz Jagerstatter, an Austrian layman executed for refusing to fight in the Nazi army.*]

John Dear's new book, *Transfiguration*, (Doubleday, with a foreword by Archbishop Tutu) is available from your local book seller or Amazon.com. These reflections on St. Maximilian are taken from John's recent book of icons, *You Will Be My Witnesses*. For more information, see: www.johndear.org.

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