

St. Maximilian Kolbe

His name wasn't always Maximilian. He was born the second son of a poor weaver on January 8, 1894 at Zdunska Wola near Lodz in Poland, and was given the baptismal name of Raymond. Both parents were devout Christians with a particular devotion to Mary. In his infancy, Raymond seems to have been normally mischievous but we are told that one day, after his mother had scolded him for some mischief or other, her words took effect and brought about a radical change in the child's behavior. Later he explained this change. "That night, I asked the Mother of God what was to become of me. Then she came to me holding two crowns, one white, and the other red. She asked me if I was willing to accept either of these crowns. The white one meant that I should persevere in purity and the red that I should become a martyr. I said that I would accept them both." Thus early did the child believe and accept that he was destined for martyrdom. His belief in his dream colored all his future actions.

In 1907, Raymond and his elder brother entered a junior Franciscan seminary in Lwow. Here he excelled in mathematics and physics and his teachers predicted a brilliant future for him in science. Others, seeing his passionate interest in all things military, saw in him a future strategist. For a time indeed, his interest in military affairs together with his fiery patriotism made him lose interest in the idea of becoming a priest. The fulfillment of his dream would lie in saving Poland from her oppressors as a soldier. But before he could tell anyone about his decision his mother announced that, as all their children were now in seminaries, she and her husband intended to enter religious life. Raymond hadn't the heart to upset his parents' plans and so he abandoned his plans for joining the army. He was received as a novice in September 1910 and with the habit he took the new name of Maximilian. From 1912 to 1915, he was in Rome studying philosophy at the Gregorian College, and from 1915 to 1919 theology at the Collegio Serafico. He was ordained in Rome on April 28, 1918.

The love of fighting didn't leave him, but while he was in Rome he stopped seeing the struggle as a military one. He didn't like what he saw of the world; in fact he saw it as downright evil. The fight, he decided, was a spiritual one. The world was bigger than Poland and there were worse slaveries than earthly ones. The fight was still on, but he would not be waging it with the sword. At that time, many Catholics in Europe regarded freemasonry as their chief enemy; and it was against the freemasons that Maximilian Kolbe began to wage war. On October 16, 1917, with six companions, he founded the Crusade of Mary Immaculate (Militia Immaculate), with the aim of "converting sinners, heretics and schismatics, particularly freemasons, and bringing all men to love Mary Immaculate".

As he entered what was to be the most creative period of his life, Fr Maximilian's health had already begun to deteriorate. He was by now in an advanced state of tuberculosis, and he felt himself overshadowed by death. His love for Mary Immaculate now became the devouring characteristic of his life. He regarded himself as no more than an instrument of her will, and the only time he was known to lose his temper was in defense of her honor. It was for her that he strived to develop all the good that was in him, and he wanted to encourage others to do the same.

When Maximilian returned to Poland in 1919, he rejoiced to see his country free once again, a liberation which he attributed to Mary Immaculate. Pius XI, in response to a request from the Polish bishops, had just promulgated the Feast of Our Lady, Queen of Poland, and Fr Maximilian wrote: "She must be the Queen of Poland of every Polish heart. We must labor to win each and every heart for her." He set himself to extend the influence of his Crusade, and formed cells and circles all over Poland. The doctors had by now pronounced him incurable; one lung had collapsed and the other was damaged. Yet it was now that he flung himself into a whirlwind of activity. In January 1922, he began to publish a monthly review, the Knight of the Immaculate, in Krakow. Its aim was to "illuminate the truth and show the true way to happiness". As funds were low, only 5,000 copies of the first issue were printed. In 1922, he removed to another friary in Grodno and acquired a small printing establishment; and from now on the review began to grow. In 1927, 70,000 copies were being printed. The Grodno Friary became too small to house such a mammoth operation, so Fr Maximilian began to look for a site nearer to Warsaw. Prince Jan Drucko-Lubecki offered him some land at Teresin, west of Warsaw, Fr Maximilian promptly erected a statue of Mary Immaculate there, and the monks began the arduous work of construction.

On November 21, 1927, the Franciscans moved from Grodno to Teresin and on December 8, the friary was consecrated and was given the name of Niepokalanow, the City of the Immaculate. "Niepokalanow", said Fr Maximilian, "is a place chosen by Mary Immaculate and is exclusively dedicated to spreading her cult. All that is and will be at Niepokalanow will belong to her. The monastic spirit will flourish here; we shall practice obedience and we shall be poor, in the spirit of St Francis."

At first, Niepokalanow consisted of no more than a few shacks with tar-paper roofs, but it soon flourished. To cope with the flood of vocations all over Poland, a junior seminary was built at Niepokalanow "to prepare priests for the missions capable of every task in the name of the Immaculate and with her help". A few years later, there were more than a hundred seminarians and the numbers were still growing. Before long, Niepokalanow had become one of the largest (some say the largest) friaries in the world. In 1939, it housed 762 inhabitants: 13 priests, 18 novices, 527 brothers, 122 boys in the junior seminary and 82 candidates for the priesthood. No matter how many laborers were in the vineyard, there was always work for more. Among the inhabitants of Niepokalanow there were doctors, dentists, farmers, mechanics, tailors, builders, printers, gardeners, shoemakers, cooks. The place was entirely self-supporting.

Not only the friary but the printing house had been expanding. More modern machinery had been installed, including three machines which could produce 16,000 copies of the review in an hour. New techniques of type, photogravure and binding were adopted. The new machinery and techniques made it possible to meet the growing demand for Knight of the Immaculate -- which had now reached the incredible circulation figure of 750,000 per month -- and to produce other publications as well. In 1935, they began to produce a daily Catholic newspaper, The Little Daily, of which 137,000 copies were printed on weekdays and 225,000 on Sundays and holydays.

Maximilian was not satisfied with mere journalistic activity. His sights were set even further. On December 8 1938, a radio station was installed at Neipokalanow with the signature tune (played by the brothers' own orchestra) of the Lourdes hymn. And now that there was so much valuable equipment around, Niepokalanow acquired its own fire brigade to protect it against its enemies. Some of the brothers were now trained as firemen.

There was no doubt that Niepokalanow was going from power to power, a unique situation within Poland. The results of the work done there were becoming apparent. Priests in parishes all over the country reported a tremendous upsurge of faith, which they attributed to the literature emerging from Niepokalanow. A campaign against abortion in the columns of the Knight (1938) seemed to awaken the conscience of the nation: more than a million people of all classes and professions ranged themselves behind the standard of Mary Immaculate. Years later, after the war, the Polish bishops sent an official letter to the Holy See claiming that Fr Kolbe's magazine had prepared the Polish nation to endure and survive the horrors of the war that was soon to follow.

Fr Maximilian was a restless spirit, and his activities could not be confined to Poland. His junior seminary had been started in 1929, but he didn't intend to wait for its first priest to be trained before he himself set out for the mission lands. To those who pointed out that Niepokalonow wasn't yet up to undertaking foreign apostolic work, he quoted the example of St Francis, who had risked himself on the mission fields when the other Orders had remained uninvolved. With the blessing of his Father General, Maximilian prepared his expedition. Asked whether he had money to finance it, he replied: "Money? It will turn up somehow or other. Mary will see to it. It's her business and her Son's."

On February 26 1930, Fr Maximilian left Poland with four brothers from Niepokalanow on a journey to the Far East. They travelled by way of Port Said, Saigon and Shanghai, and on 24 April they landed at Nagasaki in Japan. Here they were given Episcopal permission to stay. In fact Archbishop Hayasaka received them very warmly when he learned that Fr Maximilian had two doctorates and would be able to take the vacant chair of philosophy in the diocesan seminary in exchange for a license to print his review.

The going was hard. The Poles' only shelter was a wretched hut whose walls and roof were caving in. They slept on what straw they could find and their tables were planks of wood. But despite such hardships, and the fact that they knew no word of the Japanese language, and had no money, on April 24, 1930, exactly a month after their arrival, a telegram was dispatched to Niepokalanow: "Today distributing Japanese Knight. Have printing press. Praise to Mary Immaculate." After that, it was scarcely surprising that a year later the Japanese Niepokalanow was inaugurated --

Mugenzai no Sono (the Garden of the Immaculate), built on the slopes of Mount Kikosan. The choice of this site in the suburbs had been dictated by poverty, but it proved to be a lucky one. People thought Fr Maximilian was crazy to be building on steep ground sloping away from the town; but in 1945, when the atomic bomb all but leveled Nagasaki, Mugenzai no Sono sustained no more damage than a few broken panes of stained glass. Today it forms the centre of a Franciscan province.

Despite his passionate zeal in the cause of Mary, Fr Maximilian proved to be a wise missionary. He did not attempt to impose Western ideas on the Japanese. He respected their national customs and looked for what was good in Buddhism and Shintoism. He entered into dialogue with Buddhist priests and some of them became his friends. In 1931, he founded a novitiate, and in 1936 a junior seminary. And of course he continued to publish his beloved magazine. *Seibo no Kishi*, the Japanese Knight, had a circulation six times that of the nearest Japanese Catholic rival. This was because it was aimed at the whole community, not just Catholics. The first 10,000 copies had swollen to 65,000 by 1936.

Fr. Maximilian's health was rapidly deteriorating, but he didn't allow this fact to diminish his zeal -- or his restless energy. Although he often complained of the lack of manpower and machines needed to serve the people of Japan, in 1932 he was already seeking fresh pastures. On May 31 he left Japan and sailed to Malabar where, after a few initial difficulties, he founded the third *Niepokalanow*. But his superiors requested him to return to Japan, and as no priests could be spared for Malabar, that idea had to be given up. On another of his journeys, he travelled through Siberia and spent some time in Moscow. Even here, he dreamed of publishing his magazine -- in Russian. He had studied the language and had a fair acquaintance with Marxist literature. Like Pope John XXIII, he looked for the good elements, even in systems he believed to be evil; and he tried to teach his friars to do likewise.

In 1936, he was recalled to Poland, and left Japan for the last time. He had thought that he would find martyrdom there; and indeed he had found martyrdom of a kind. He was racked by violent headaches and covered with abscesses brought on by the food to which he could not grow accustomed. But these things were only pinpricks: the real martyrdom awaited him elsewhere.

Just before the Second World War broke out, Fr Maximilian spoke to his friars about suffering. They must not be afraid, he said, for suffering accepted with love would bring them closer to Mary. All his life, he had dreamt of a martyr's crown, and the time was nearly at hand.

By September 13, 1939, *Niepokalanow* had been occupied by the invading Germans and most of its inhabitants had been deported to Germany. Among them was Fr Maximilian. But that exile did not last long and on December 8, (the feast of the Immaculate Conception) the prisoners were set free. From the moment that he returned to *Niepokalanow*, Fr Maximilian was galvanized into a new kind of activity. He began to organize a shelter for 3,000 Polish refugees, among who were 2,000 Jews. "We must do everything in our power to help these unfortunate people who have been driven from their homes and deprived of even the most basic necessities. Our mission is among them in the days that lie ahead." The friars shared everything they had with the refugees. They housed, fed and clothed them, and brought all their machinery into use in their service.

Inevitably, the community came under suspicion and was watched closely. Early in 1941, in the only edition of *The Knight of the Immaculate* which he was allowed to publish, Fr Maximilian set pen to paper and thus provoked his own arrest. "No one in the world can change Truth," he wrote. "What we can do and should do is to seek truth and to serve it when we have found it. The real conflict is the inner conflict. Beyond armies of occupation and the hecatombs of extermination camps, there are two irreconcilable enemies in the depth of every soul: good and evil, sin and love. And what use are the victories on the battlefield if we ourselves are defeated in our innermost personal selves?"

He would never know that kind of defeat; but a more obvious defeat was near. On February 17 1941, he was arrested and sent to the infamous Pawiak prison in Warsaw. Here he was singled out for special ill-treatment. A witness tells us that in March of that year an SS guard, seeing this man in his habit girdled with a rosary, asked if he believed in Christ. When the priest calmly replied, "I do", the guard struck him. The SS man repeated his question several times and receiving always the same answer went on beating him mercilessly. Shortly afterwards the Franciscan habit was taken

away and a prisoner's garment was substituted. On 28 May, Fr Maximilian was with over 300 others who were deported from Pawiak to Auschwitz. There he received his striped convict's garments and was branded with the number 16670. He was put to work immediately carrying blocks of stone for the construction of a crematorium wall. On the last day of May he was assigned with other priests to the Babice section which was under the direction of "Bloody" Krott, an ex-criminal. "These men are layabouts and parasites", said the Commandant to Krott, "get them working." Krott forced the priests to cut and carry huge tree trunks. The work went on all day without stop and had to be done running --- with the aid of vicious blows from the guards. Despite his one lung, Father Maximilian accepted the work and the blows with surprising calm. Krott conceived a relentless hatred against the Franciscan and gave him heavier tasks than the others. Sometimes his colleagues would try to come to his aid but he would not expose them to danger. Always he replied, "Mary gives me strength. All will be well." At this time he wrote to his mother, "Do not worry about me or my health, for the good Lord is everywhere and holds every one of us in his great love."

One day, Krott found some of the heaviest planks he could lay hold of and personally loaded them on the Franciscan's back, ordering him to run. When he collapsed, Krott kicked him in the stomach and face and had his men give him fifty lashes. When the priest lost consciousness Krott threw him in the mud and left him for dead. But his companions managed to smuggle him to the Revier, the camp hospital. Although he was suffering greatly, he secretly heard confessions in the hospital and spoke to the other inmates of the love of God. In Auschwitz, where hunger and hatred reigned and faith evaporated, this man opened his heart to others and spoke of God's infinite love. He seemed never to think of himself. When food was brought in and everyone struggled to get his place in the queue so as to be sure of a share, Fr Maximilian stood aside, so that frequently there was none left for him. At other times he shared his meager ration of soup or bread with others. He was once asked whether such self-abnegation made sense in a place where every man was engaged in a struggle for survival, and he answered: "Every man has an aim in life. For most men it is to return home to their wives and families, or to their mothers. For my part, I give my life for the good of all men."

Men gathered in secret to hear his words of love and encouragement, but it was his example which counted for most. Fr Zygmunt Ruscak remembers: "Each time I saw Fr Kolbe in the courtyard I felt within myself an extraordinary effusion of his goodness. Although he wore the same ragged clothes as the rest of us, with the same tin can hanging from his belt, one forgot his wretched exterior and was conscious only of the charm of his inspired countenance and of his radiant holiness."

There remained only the last act in the drama. The events are recorded in the sworn testimonials of former inmates of the camp, collected as part of the beatification proceedings. They are as follows:

Tadeusz Joachimowski, clerk of Block 14A: "In the summer of 1941, most probably on the last day of July, the camp siren announced that there had been an escape. At the evening roll-call of the same day we, ie Block 14A, were formed up in the street between the buildings of Blocks 14 and 17. After some delay we were joined by a group of the Landwirtschafts-Kommando. During the count it was found that three prisoners from this Kommando had escaped: one from our Block and the two others from other Blocks. Lagerfuhrer Fritzsich announced that on account of the escape of the three prisoners, ten prisoners would be picked in reprisal from the blocks in which the fugitives had lived and would be assigned to the Bunker (the underground starvation cell)"

Jan Jakub Zegidewicz takes up the story from there: "After the group of doomed men had already been selected, a prisoner stepped out from the ranks of one of the Blocks. I recognized Fr Kolbe. Owing to my poor knowledge of German I did not understand what they talked about, nor do I remember whether Fr Kolbe spoke directly to Fritzsich. When making his request, Fr Kolbe stood at attention and pointed at a former non-commissioned officer known to me from the camp. It could be inferred from the expression on Fritzsich's face that he was surprised at Fr Kolbe's action. As the sign was given, Fr Kolbe joined the ranks of the doomed and the non-commissioned officer left the ranks of the doomed. Fritzsich had consented to the exchange. A little later, the doomed men were marched off in the direction of Block 13, the death Block."

The non-commissioned officer was Franciszek Gajowniczek. When the sentence of doom had been pronounced, Gajowniczek had cried out in despair, "Oh, my poor wife, my poor children. I shall never see them again." It was then

that the unexpected had happened, and that from among the ranks of those temporarily reprieved, prisoner 16670 had stepped forward and offered himself in the other man's place. Then the ten condemned men were led off to the dreaded Bunker, to the airless underground cells where men died slowly without food or water.

Bruno Borgowiec was an eyewitness of those last terrible days, for he was an assistant to the janitor and an interpreter in the underground Bunkers. He tells us what happened: "In the cell of the poor wretches there were daily loud prayers, the rosary and singing, in which prisoners from neighboring cells also joined. When no SS men were in the Block, I went to the Bunker to talk to the men and comfort them. Fervent prayers and songs to the Holy Mother resounded in all the corridors of the Bunker. I had the impression I was in a church. Fr Kolbe was leading and the prisoners responded in unison. They were often so deep in prayer that they did not even hear that inspecting SS men had descended to the Bunker; and the voices fell silent only at the loud yelling of their visitors. When the cells were opened the poor wretches cried loudly and begged for a piece of bread and for water, which they did not receive, however. If any of the stronger ones approached the door he was immediately kicked in the stomach by the SS men, so that falling backwards on the cement floor he was instantly killed; or he was shot to death ... Fr Kolbe bore up bravely, he did not beg and did not complain but raised the spirits of the others. ... Since they had grown very weak, prayers were now only whispered. At every inspection, when almost all the others were now lying on the floor, Fr Kolbe was seen kneeling or standing in the centre as he looked cheerfully in the face of the SS men. After ten days, he and three others remained alive. The authorities felt this was too long; the cell was needed for new victims. On August 14, 1941, the authorities brought in a German doctor named Bock, and killed them with an injection of carbolic acid. One after the other they died, until only Fr Kolbe was left. Fr Kolbe was also given an injection of carbolic acid in the vein of his left arm. Fr Kolbe, with a prayer on his lips, himself gave his arm to the executioner. Unable to watch this I left under the pretext of work to be done. Immediately after the SS men with the executioner had left I returned to the cell, where I found Fr Kolbe leaning in a sitting position against the back wall with his eyes open and his head dropping sideways. His face was calm and radiant."

The heroism of Fr Kolbe went echoing through Auschwitz. In that desert of hatred he had sown love. Mr Jozef Stemler, former director of an important cultural institute in Poland, comments: "In those conditions ... in the midst of brutalization of thought and feeling and words such as had never before been known, man indeed became a ravening wolf in his relations with other men. And into this state of affairs came the heroic self-sacrifice of Fr Maximilian. The atmosphere grew lighter, as this thunderbolt provoked its profound and salutary shock." Jerzy Bielecki declared that Fr Kolbe's death was "a shock filled with hope, bringing new life and strength. ... It was like a powerful shaft of light in the darkness of the camp."

His reputation spread far and wide, through the Nazi camps and beyond. After the war newspapers all over the world were deluged with articles about this "saint for our times", "saint of progress", "giant of holiness". Biographies were written, and everywhere there were claims of cures being brought about through his intercession. "The life and death of this one man alone," wrote the Polish bishops, "can be proof and witness of the fact that the love of God can overcome the greatest hatred, the greatest injustice, even death itself." The demands for his beatification became insistent, and at last on August 12, 1947 proceedings started. Seventy-five witnesses were questioned. His cause was introduced on March 16, 1960. When all the usual objections had been overcome, the promoter spoke of the "charm of this magnificent fool." On October 17, 1971, Maximilian Kolbe was beatified. Like his master Jesus Christ he had loved his fellow-men to the point of sacrificing his life for them. "Greater love hath no man than this ..." and these were the opening words of the papal decree introducing the process of beatification. Fr Kolbe's canonization was not long delayed. It was the Pope from Poland, John Paul II, who had the joy of declaring his compatriot a saint on October 10, 1982.

St Maximilian Kolbe's feast day is August 14, the day before the Feast of the Assumption of Our Lady.

St Maximilian Mary Kolbe, pray for us.