

St. Maximilian Kolbe

By M. Regina Cram

Raymond Kolbe was a Polish Catholic youth who left home in 1907 to enroll in the Conventual Franciscan seminary. He was given the religious name Maximilian and was later ordained a priest.

Fr. Kolbe settled in the monastery of Niepokalanów near Warsaw, where he became very ill from tuberculosis. He experienced poor health for the rest of his life, but never complained, seeing his illness as an opportunity to ‘suffer for Mary’

By the 1930s, the monastery was in constant danger because they published anti-Nazi publications. Kolbe even gained a radio license and publicly broadcast the gospel. The monastery also helped hide, feed and clothe 3,000 Polish refugees, half of whom were Jews

In February 1941, the Gestapo arrested Fr. Kolbe for hiding Jews. Ultimately, he was sent to Auschwitz.

Kolbe was assigned to the work camp, carrying blocks of heavy stone for the building of the crematorium. The overseer was a vicious ex-criminal who singled out Kolbe for particularly brutal treatment. On one occasion the guard made Kolbe carry the heaviest planks until he collapsed. The guard savagely beat him, then left him for dead in the mud. Fellow prisoners secretly moved him to the camp prison to recover. Other prisoners later reported that he remained selfless, often sharing his meager rations with others.

In July 1941, three prisoners escaped from the camp. As punishment, Auschwitz officials selected 10 men to starve to death in an underground bunker.

When Franciszek Gajowniczek was selected, he cried out “My wife! My children!”

St. Maximilian Kolbe volunteered to take his place. He told the commandant, “I am a Catholic priest from Poland; I would like to take his place because he has a wife and children.” It was the only instance when the commandant allowed a prisoner to take another’s place.

Gajowniczek said later, “I was stunned by the immensity of it: I, the condemned, am to live and someone else willingly and voluntarily offers his life for me – a stranger.”

The ten men were led to the underground bunker and left to die. Bruno Borgowiec, a Polish prisoner charged with serving the prisoners, later said, “Those men went through terrible days. From their bleak underground cell, there continually arose the echo of prayers and canticles. When they grew weak, prayers were only whispered. At every inspection, when almost all the others were lying on the floor, Father Kolbe was kneeling and looking cheerfully at the SS men.

One of the SS guards remarked, “This priest is really a great man. We have never seen anyone like him.”

After two weeks, all the prisoners except Kolbe, had died of dehydration and starvation. The guards wanted the cell emptied for new prisoners, so Kolbe was executed with a lethal injection.

The news of Fr. Maximilian Kolbe’s sacrifice spread across Auschwitz, offering rare light and dignity in the face of blistering cruelty.

Miraculously, Franciszek Gajowniczek survived Auschwitz, and forty years later he was present at Fr. Kolbe’s canonization.

At his canonization, Pope John Paul II said, “Maximilian did not die but gave his life ... for his brother.”