

Maximilian Kolbe
Priest, Martyr

August 14

Maximilian Kolbe was born Rajmund Kolbe in January 1894 in a village near Lodz, Poland. His parents were devout Catholics, and he received some of his education at a Franciscan minor seminary. At the age of 16 he entered the novitiate, taking the name Maksymilian. After further education in Cracow and Rome he made his solemn profession on All Saints' Day 1914. After further studies in Rome he was ordained priest in 1918. Although suffering from tuberculosis, Maximilian did not let that hinder his dreams of a spiritual militia to combat the evils of the day. The Militia Immaculatae was given papal approval in March 1919.

Poland had been the main battleground of the eastern campaigns of the war, and in 1919 Maximilian returned to Poland to become professor of church history at the Cracow seminary. He established a press to keep members of the Militia informed, and the publishing venture became a huge success. By 1927 the presses had moved to Warsaw, and the friary grew. In 1929 a minor teaching seminary was opened as well. The Militia and the publishing work expanded to Nagasaki in Japan in 1936, where Maximilian spent some time. He was recalled to Poland in 1936 to head what was now one of the largest friaries in the world, with over 700 friars.

In 1939 Germany invaded Poland. As far as possible Maximilian dispersed the friary for safety reasons. They took in refugees. The German army closed the friary in September 1939 and detained some of the friars. They were released in December and engaged in helping the numerous refugees and the sick from the fall of Warsaw. The refugees included Poles and Jews.

Maximilian began publishing again, and, given that some of the material published was critical of the Third Reich, it came as no surprise when he was arrested in February 1941. He was taken first to Pawiak in Warsaw. He ministered to his fellow prisoners and suffered abuse at the hands of his guards. In May he was taken in a group of 300 to Auschwitz. Maximilian again ministered to the other prisoners, always sharing his rations, and offered himself to be beaten in the place of others.

At the end of July 1941 a prisoner escaped from Auschwitz. The camp commandant instituted the usual reprisal: ten prisoners were to be starved to death in an underground bunker. One of the selected victims was Franciszek Gajowniczek. At that moment, Maximilian stepped forward and said, "I am a Catholic priest. I wish to die for that man; I am old; he has a wife and children." Surprisingly, the German officer accepted the exchange, and Gajowniczek eventually survived to be present at the Vatican in 1982 when Kolbe was canonised. Maximilian Kolbe was one of the last of the ten to die, being finally despatched with an injection by a camp doctor on 14 August 1941. In his last days, by prayer and psalms, he prepared the others for death, turning degradation into celebration.

For Liturgical Use

Maximilian Kolbe was a Franciscan priest whose commitment to truth took him to Auschwitz, where he voluntarily sacrificed his life. He was born in 1894. Before the German invasion of Poland in 1939 he had become a leading Catholic publisher and head of a Franciscan house. He was sent to Auschwitz for publishing material critical of the Third Reich. When in August 1941 ten prisoners were condemned to be starved to death in reprisal for a single escape, Kolbe offered to take the place of a family man, who lived to attend Kolbe's canonisation in 1982.

Sentence

I called on your name, O Lord, from the depths of the pit. You came near when I called on you; you said, "Do not fear!" *Lamentations 3:55,57*

Collects

Everloving God,
your gift to us is life eternal
through your Son's willing sacrifice of himself;
may the example of Maximilian Kolbe
strengthen us to spend ourselves in your service
and bear the burdens of others even to death;
for the sake of Jesus Christ our Saviour.

Jesus, you gave your life so others should live;
Maximilian your follower
took a fellow-prisoner's place
to save him for his family;
to you be praise and glory
for those who follow you.

Psalms

13

79

Readings

2 Maccabees 6:18-20,30-31

1 Peter 2:19-24

John 15:9-14

A memorial of courage

Healed by Christ's wounds

One's life for one's friends

Post Communion Sentence

Jesus said, "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul."

Matthew 10:28