

She Will Aid Us. She is Our Protector.

“Only Love is Creative”

The Year of Father Kolbe - 2010/2011



The Servant of God John Paul II in his homily during the canonization of Father Maksymilian Kolbe on October 12, 1982, said:

"Men saw what happened in the camp at Auschwitz. And even if to their eyes it must have seemed that a companion of their torment 'dies', even if humanly speaking they could consider 'his departure' as 'a disaster', nevertheless in their minds this was not simply 'death'. Maximilian did not die but 'gave his life...for his brother'."

The life of Saint Father Maksymilian Kolbe is a call for love, which the world needs to learn anew. In the secularized world, a person easily moves away from the commandment of love in pursuit of pleasures, without taking responsibility for other people, without sacrifice, but most of all without relating their life to Christ. Without sacrificial love, it is difficult to live in a state, nation or family. The world craves love and can rediscover its true meaning, if it is willing to observe not only Father Kolbe's martyrdom but also the entirety of his life.

Many scholarly works have been written about him in Poland, other parts of Europe, the United States, Japan and other countries. He was a priest, a Franciscan monk, a founder of two Niepokalanow monasteries: one in Poland (1927) and one - Mugenzai no Sono - in Japan (1930). During his studies of philosophy and theology at universities in Rome (1912-1918) he founded an international association called "Militia Immaculata" ("MI"), or in other words, "Knights of the Immaculate." At the age of 24, he was ordained a priest (1918). He returned to his homeland with two doctorate degrees and became a lecturer at the Franciscan seminary in Cracow. That is where, in 1922, he published the first issue of the periodical "Knight of the Immaculate," whose purpose was the unification of all members of the Marianist association. The publishing center moved to Grodno, and in 1927 to the newly founded monastery at Niepokalanow (Immaculateville) - named as such, because everything situated there together with all of its inhabitants was to be the property and instrument of the Immaculate.

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Father Maksymilian erected the monastery from scratch in the marshes, on the wet fields of Teresin, near Warsaw. Together with other brothers he built a chapel, a bedroom, workshops for mechanical work, woodwork, sewing, shoemaking, a printing hall, but most importantly, spiritual life. He assured his fellow brothers that those devoted to the Immaculate can courageously walk toward the Lord Jesus. "With the aid of the Immaculate, you shall accomplish all. SHE WILL AID US." Does this not remind us of John Paul II's *Totus Tuus*?

In 1929, Father Maksymilian opened the Small Missionary Seminary in Niepokalanowo – today known as the Kolbe-Marianist Institute, a branch of the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University. Soon after, in 1930, together with four other brothers he founded the second Niepokalanow monastery in Nagasaki, Japan, called Mugenzai no Sono. His work as a lecturer in the local spiritual seminary provided the financial means for the upkeep of the monastery. In the same year, he informed his superiors that he was beginning to publish "Knight of the Immaculate" in Japanese. In addition, he also established a small seminary for the Franciscan monastery candidates. He surrounded himself with Japanese intellectuals, including those from outside the Catholic community.

The numbers of candidates, members and monks in Mugenzai no Sono increased every day, even through the present time. At the same time, the Niepokalanow monastery in Poland was also growing in area and numbers. After six years, Father Maksymilian returned to his homeland to take over the management of the monastery, the publishing center and implemented fundamental reforms. In 1938, circulation reached a million copies. The membership of the monastery - fathers, brothers, seminarians and candidates – about 900 people – formed the largest monastery in Poland and Europe and second largest in the world.

In September 1939, the outbreak of World War II disrupted the existing economic, political and religious activity in Poland. Soviets and Nazis plundered the cultural heritage, demolished and bombed villages and cities and deported the people to concentration camps or executed them – a death sentence without due process. Intellectual elites were hunted down by the Germans and taken to death camps such as Auschwitz, Dachau, Gross Rose, Mauthausen. On the Russian side, Siberia, Katyn or Ostaszkow awaited them as well.

Father Maksymilian, together with other members of the monastery was taken to several German camps, but thanks to Divine Providence on the day of the feast of the Immaculate Conception, December 8, 1940, they all are freed. Together with a group of brothers, he returned from exile to his Niepokalanow. Here, however, he found a new reality – the Germans turned the monastery into their local headquarters. Where once printing presses were humming "conquer the whole world for Christ through the Immaculate," now you could hear screams, profanities and violence.

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In spite of all that he saw, Father Maksymilian preached to the small flock of brothers: “Only love is creative,” “She will aid us – she has been given to us for protection.” This February, 2011, will be 70 years from the event that took place in Niepokolanow and which, despite expectations, proved to bear unexpected fruit. This triptic of human life: suffering, death and glory has its equivalent in the Way of the Cross, Golgotha and Resurrection. It is worth noting that although Father Maksymilian was often depicted in illustrations as a smiling saint, he did not have a joyful life. Since his youth he was afflicted with tuberculosis (one of his lungs had to be removed), but persevered until the end of his own way of the cross.

On February 17, 1941, Germans arrested Father Kolbe again together with four of his assistants and took them to Pawiak, the German Gestapo prison in Warsaw. That is where the future saint professed his faith. When a German official saw the cross on his Franciscan rosary, he screamed in a fit of rage: “Do you believe in this?” – “Yes” – answered Father Kolbe in a calm voice that earned him a fist in his face. This question was posed repeatedly even though the answer was always the same and was followed by face beatings until the prisoner was knocked down to the ground. Fellow prisoners of cell 103 lifted Father Kolbe and helped him sit down. Since then, he continued to give testimony of his apostolate by taking a heroic stance in his priestly life.

May 28, 1941, represented the beginning of his way of the cross which led Father Maksymilian to the “valley of corpses” at Auschwitz. According to reports prepared by the commander of the camp Karl Fritzsich, two thousand people were killed at Auschwitz daily. Auschwitz, with a welcoming sign “Arbeit Macht Frei” (Work Makes you Free), led not to freedom but to death.

New prisoners were stripped of all human dignity and possessions and were given blood stained, dirty, lice ridden striped clothes and wooden clogs, and each assigned a number. Father Kolbe’s number was 16670. The forementioned Fritzsich turned all the priests over to the command of Kapo Krotte, also known as “bloody Krotte,” infamous at the camp for his cruelty, sadism and barbaric tortures of prisoners. Kapo Krotte treated Father Kolbe with particular brutality. Father Kolbe was forced to carry heavy, often double pillars or fencing beams from a forest half a kilometer away, always running and spurred by beatings with clubs or whips. When Kappo Krotte got tired, he had other prisoners beat Father Kolbe. One time, when it seemed that Father Kolbe was not giving any sign of life, Krotte piled branches on top of him and left convinced that he had killed him. But the merciful prisoners, after they finished their work, carried him back to the camp infirmary – known as “death chamber.” He fulfilled his apostolate there by secretly hearing confessions at night.

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During roll-call, on July 29, 1941, one prisoner was missing from Father Kolbe's barrack. The roll-call lasted the entire day, despite the July heat, with no food or drink. In the evening, the camp commander Fritzsich declared his will – ten prisoners would be condemned to death in the chamber of starvation for one escapee. To this day, it is not clear whether this one prisoner did escape or whether he was killed during daily labor. When the selection of the ten prisoners was finalized, one of them cried: “My poor wife and children!” At that time, Father Kolbe stepped out of the ranks. Krotte flung himself at him screaming: “Get back to your place!” Father Maksymilian asked to speak to the camp commander. Then, the unthinkable happened – Krotte lowered the wooden club and retreated, and Father Kolbe approached Fritzsich. Fritzsich reached for his gun and yelled: “Stop! What is the meaning of this?” That did not frighten Father Kolbe as he stood in front of Fritzsich. The camp commander, clearly shocked and surprised by this behavior, said: “What does this Polish pig want?” to which Father Kolbe calmly replied in German: “I wish to die instead of one of these prisoners.” - “For which one?” - asked Fritzsich. Again the unthinkable happened, as the master of life and death engaged in a dialogue with a prisoner who for him represented a subhuman, “number 16670.” “Who are you?” – he asked. “I am a Polish Catholic priest” – answered the future saint.

With this testimony, Father Maksymilian sent himself to die for someone he did not know, “prisoner number 5659” – Franciszek Gajowniczek, a sergeant of the Polish Army, captured by the Germans in street raids and sent to Auschwitz. He survived the concentration camp. In the 1970s I visited him in Brzeg, near Opole and in the 1980s, he visited the United States twice.

The fate of the ten chosen prisoners is reminiscent of Calvary – they were stripped of the camp rags and were led naked to cell number 18, in the basement of block 11, a room measuring only 2.5 by 2.5 meters. They were locked there to die of hunger. After two weeks, on August 14, 1941, Father Kolbe and three other companions were still alive. Because the cell was needed for other purposes, the prisoners were finished off with a phenol injection delivered by the camp nurse – a criminal named Bock. Upon seeing the approaching executioner, Father Maksymilian stretched out his hand willingly to receive the lethal injection. At that moment he most certainly saw the Immaculate who was holding two crowns in her hands, one red and one white, and who spoke in a gentle voice heard in the entire camp, Poland, Germany, Europe and the world: “Come faithful servant, both crowns are yours.”

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We should add one more date to those three events – August 15, 1941, since the bodies were cremated on the afternoon of the feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary and Her Knight: she - the Queen of Heaven and Earth; he – the King in a double crown.



While celebrating the Year of Father Kolbe, we must take a closer look at ourselves.

How Christian and human are we? How much are we willing to give to Christ and those in need? Are we able to love above all else? During this year, we will be searching for the answer in our family life, our professional life and our parish life. Perhaps we will seek out some noteworthy Catholic books published by Father Maksymilian or by other Catholic publishers to deepen our religious, national and patriotic knowledge.

In 1957, Cardinal Stefan Wyszynski, described Father Maksymilian Kolbe: “He is not a figure for the archives, he is indescribable, impossible to label, index, place on a library bookshelf in several or even dozens of volumes. His persona is too large for archives. He will always spring from bookshelves... He will always surpass us ... the Way of Father Maksymilian for all intents and purposes is just beginning.”

Father Kolbe’s ideal was the Immaculate for whom he lived, worked and died. He fulfilled his biggest dream – he became a saint and his death resembled the death of Jesus at Golgotha. “Only love is creative.” “She will aid us.” Father Kolbe was a happy man. Let his example strengthen us.

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