

Dear Friends,

Raymund Kolbe (Saint Maximilian) was born in 1894 in Poland to relatively poor parents and developed a strong religious desire from an early life. He recounts an early childhood vision of the Virgin Mary, ***“That night, I asked the Mother of God what was to become of me, a Child of Faith. Then she came to me holding two crowns, one white, 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.”***



Kolbe was ordained in 1918. He had a strong devotion to the Virgin Mary and he became an active participant in the Militia Immaculata or Army of Mary.

At the start of the Second World War, was residing in the friary at the Niepokalanów (“City of the Immaculata.”) On February 17, 1941, he was arrested by the Gestapo and was sent to Auschwitz concentration camp. Despite the awful conditions of Auschwitz, people report that Kolbe retained a deep faith and dignity in the face of terrible treatment.

On July 1941, three prisoners escaped from Auschwitz. As a result, the Commander ordered 10 men to be chosen to be starved to death in a bunker. When one of the selected

men, Franciszek Gajowniczek, heard he was selected, he cried out “My wife! My children!” Father Kolbe, who spoke German, step forward and said: “I am a Catholic priest from Poland; I would like to take his place because he has a wife and children.” Rather surprised, the commander accepted Kolbe in place of Gajowniczek. Gajowniczek later said: ***“I could only thank him with my eyes. I was stunned and could hardly grasp what was going on. The immensity of it: I, the condemned, am to live and someone else willingly and voluntarily offers his life for me – a stranger. Is this some dream? I was put back into my place without***

having had time to say anything to Maximilian Kolbe. I was saved. And I owe to him the fact that I could tell you all this. Gajowniczek miraculously survived Auschwitz, and was present at Kolbe's canonization in 1982.

The men were led away to the underground bunker where they were to be starved to death. There, Kolbe would lead the men in prayer and singing hymns to Mary. After two weeks, nearly all the prisoners, except Kolbe, had died due to dehydration and starvation. The guards wanted the cell emptied, so the remaining prisoners and Kolbe were executed with a lethal injection. His remains were unceremoniously cremated on August 15, 1941 (the Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary).

The deed and courage of Maximilian Kolbe spread around the Auschwitz prisoners, offering a rare glimpse of light and human dignity in the face of extreme cruelty. After the war, his reputation grew and he became a symbol of courageous dignity. He was canonized as a martyr by Pope John Paul II (who himself lived through the German occupation of Poland) in 1982.

At his canonization, Pope John Paul II said: ***"Maximilian did not die but gave his life ... for his brother."***

I hope you will make time and come on April 18 at 7:00 PM to gym of St. Joseph Central Catholic School to see the stage play about this remarkable saint.

Looking forward to see you there,
Fr. Krzysztof Kardzis