

WITNESS

ST MAXIMILIAN KOLBE

“The Patron Saint of our Difficult Century”

Early Years

His name wasn't always Maximilian. He was the second of five sons of Juliusz Kolbe and Marianna Dabrowska. He was born on 8th January 1894 in Zdunska Wola, near Lodz (at that time part of the Russian Empire) and baptised Rajmund Kolbe at the parish church of the Assumption of the Holy Virgin Mary. His parents were domestic weavers but owing to very hard conditions of living they had to move to Pabianice where his father worked in a factory and his mother ran a little shop and also worked as a midwife. Two of his brothers, Walenty and Andrew died in childhood and two others survived, namely Francis and Joseph. Both parents were members of the Third Order of St Francis and were devout Catholics with particular devotion to Our Lady. Rajmund as a small child was a normally mischievous youngster which lead his mother in frustration to reproach him with the words “Mundek, what will become of you”? He remembered these words for a long time, words which brought about a radical change in his behaviour. He asked the Mother of God what indeed was to become of him? At the age of 12 years the Virgin Mary appeared to him, holding two crowns, one white and the other, red. She asked him if he was willing to accept either of these. The white one meant that he should persevere in purity and the red one symbolised martyrdom. He said he would accept both and so at this early age he had an understanding of his destiny which coloured all his future actions.

In 1907 the Franciscan Conventual monks organized missions in Pabianice. Rajmund with his elder brother Francis, decided to join the Franciscan order. Both managed to cross the borders between partitioned Poland from the Russian part to the Austrian one, to Lvov. So at thirteen years of age Rajmund began his junior seminary training. Three years later the younger brother Joseph also joined them. Rajmund excelled in mathematics and physics and his teachers predicted a brilliant future for him in science. Incidentally, later on when he was studying in Rome he wrote an article entitled “Etereoplan” about an interplanetary space vehicle. He was interested in astrophysics and the prospect of space flight. He designed an aeroplane-like spacecraft, similar in concept to the eventual space shuttle and attempted to patent it. Others, seeing his passionate interest in things military saw in him a future strategist. In fact for a time his interest in military affairs together with his fiery patriotism made him lose interest in becoming a priest. He thought of becoming a soldier and fighting for Poland against her oppressors.

In 1914, his father joined Jozef Pilsudski’s Polish Legions and was captured and hanged by the Russians for fighting for the independence of a partitioned Poland. Rajmund, gave up his plans for a military career and went on to complete his studies for the priesthood in Rome at the Pontifical Gregorian University and at the Collegio Serafico where he obtained two Ph.D titles, one in philosophy (1912-1915) and the other in theology (1915-1919). On 28th April 1918 he was ordained and with the habit he took the name Maximilian Maria Kolbe – Maria in honour of the Blessed Virgin.

The love of fighting didn’t leave him, but while in Rome as a student he had begun to see the struggle as a spiritual one rather than a military one. The world was bigger than Poland and there were worse slaveries than earthly ones. At this time he witnessed

vehement demonstrations against Popes St. Pius X and Benedict XV by the Freemasons in Rome. Consequently, in 1917 he was inspired along with six companions to found the Crusade of Mary Immaculate or “Militia Immaculatae” to work for the conversion of sinners and enemies of the Catholic Church through the intercession of the Virgin Mary. In the publications of their newly founded organization, he made an attack on communism, freemasonry, capitalism and imperialism.

Back to Poland

By the time Fr. Maximilian returned to Poland in 1919, his health had been deteriorating and he was stricken with tuberculosis which almost killed him and left him in a frail condition for the rest of his life. He had to take medical leave for 8 months to be treated at the hospital in Zakopane in the Tatra mountains. However, his devotion to Our Lady did not wane and he saw himself as simply an instrument of her will and to that end he strove to draw others to her. Maximilian rejoiced in the fact that Poland was a free country again and Pope Pius XI, at a request from the Polish bishops promulgated the Feast of Our Lady, Queen of Poland. Fr. Maximilian wrote “She must be the Queen of Poland of every Polish heart. We must labour to win each and every heart for her”. He began 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 threw himself into a whirlwind of activity.

In January 1922 he began to publish a monthly review called the “*Knight of the Immaculate*” in Krakow. Its aim was to “illuminate the truth and show the true way to happiness”. Funds were scarce and only 5,000 copies of the first issue were printed. So enthusiastic was

Fr. Maximilian that his superiors were afraid that he would run the monastery into debt, so they moved him to another friary in Grodno and by 1927 the circulation had reached 70,000 copies. The Grodno friary ultimately became too small for 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 and he immediately erected a statue of Mary Immaculate there and the monks began construction of a monastery-publishing house called Niepokalanów which means in Polish "Immaculate". Fr. Maximilian had to take another medical leave for 7 months between September 1926 and April 1927. But the work continued and the monastery was consecrated on 8th. December 1927. Fr. Maximilian was to write,

"All that is and will be at Niepokalanow will belong to her (Our Lady). The monastic spirit will flourish here; we shall practise 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 from all over Poland, a junior seminary was built "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. Ever restless, and not content with mere journalistic activities, Fr. Maximilian set his sights ever further. On December 8th. 1938 a radio station was installed with the signature tune of the Lourdes hymn (played by the monks' own orchestra). Even a fire brigade was acquired and some of the brothers were trained as firemen. With more modern machinery installed including three machines which could produce 16,000 copies an hour of the "*Knight of the Immaculate*" the circulation rose to 750,000 per month. The

monastery began to print other publications as well, such as a Catholic daily newspaper "*The Little Daily*" of which 137,000 copies were printed on weekdays and 225,000 on Sundays and holydays.

Before long, by the outbreak of the second world war in 1939, Niepokalanow had become the largest monastery then in the world and one of the largest in the history of the Church with 762 inhabitants, including 13 priests, 18 novices, 527 brothers, 122 boys in the junior seminary and 82 candidates for the priesthood. Among the inhabitants of Niepokalanow were doctors, dentists, farmers, mechanics, tailors, builders printers, gardeners shoemakers and cooks. The place was entirely self-supporting.

The fruits of the work carried out there were becoming apparent. Priests in parishes all over the country were reporting a tremendous upsurge of faith, which they attributed to the literature emerging from Niepokalanow. A campaign against abortion in the columns of the "*Knight*" in 1938 seemed to awaken the conscience of the nation and more than a million people of all classes and professions rallied behind the standard of Mary Immaculate.

The Far East

Even before the full flowering of Niepokalanow, Fr. Maximilian did not confine his activities to Poland. With the blessing of his Father General he set out on 26th February 1930 with four of the brothers on a journey to the Far East. Asked whether he had money to finance his expedition he replied, " Money? It will turn up somehow or other. Mary will see to it. It's her business and her Son's." They travelled through Port Said, Saigon and Shanghai and landed at Nagasaki in Japan on 24th April. Archbishop Hayasaka welcomed them warmly, giving them permission to stay, especially when he heard that Fr. Maximilian had two doctorates and could take the chair of

philosophy at the diocesan seminary in return for a license to print his "*Knight of the Immaculate*". In spite of the missionaries' poverty, their poor accommodation and their lack of knowledge of the Japanese language, a telegram reached Niepokalanow one month after they arrived – "Today distributing Japanese *Knight*. Have printing press. Praise to Mary Immaculate".

Not surprisingly, within a year the Japanese Niepokalanow was begun! – Mugenzai No Sono which means in Japanese – The Garden of the Immaculate, built on the slopes of Mount Kikosan. People thought that Fr. Maximilian was crazy to build on this particular side of the mountain. According to Shinto belief it was not the side that was in best tune with nature. But it was providential. When the atomic bomb fell on Nagasaki in 1945 the blast of the bomb hit the side of the mountain that the monastery was not located on and the monastery only sustained a few broken panes of stained glass. Had it been on the other side, his work and all of his fellow monks would have been destroyed. Fr. Maximilian was wise and he did not attempt to impose Western ideas on the Japanese. He respected their national customs and engaged in dialogue with the Buddhist priests some of whom became his friends. In 1931 he founded a novitiate and in 1936 a Junior seminary. He continued to publish his Japanese *Knight* – Seibo no Kishi which had a circulation six times that of the regular Japanese Catholic periodical. This was because it was published for the whole community and not just Catholics. By 1936 its circulation was 65,000 copies. The monastery founded then in the early 30's, survived the war and today serves as a centre of Franciscan work in Japan.

In mid- 1932 Fr. Maximilian left Japan for Malabar in India where he founded a third Niepokalanow. However, due to a lack of manpower it did not survive. His superiors had requested that he return to

Japan as no priests could be spared for Malabar. On another of his journeys he travelled through Siberia and spent some time in Moscow. He had dreamt of producing his magazine in Russian, since he had studied the language and was familiar with Marxist literature. He looked for the good elements even in regimes that he considered erroneous. His achievements were remarkable considering his ill-health.

The Red Crown of Martyrdom

In 1936 he was recalled to Poland. He had thought that he would die in Japan where he suffered from violent headaches and abscesses brought on by the food to which he could not become accustomed. Often Fr. Maximilian would speak to his friars about suffering. He told them that they must not be afraid because suffering accepted with love would bring them closer to Mary. Following the Nazi invasion of Poland he was arrested in September 1939 along with several of the friars but they were released on December 8th and returned to Niepokalanow. He immediately began to organize shelter for 3,000 Polish refugees, 2,000 of whom Jewish. He wrote, "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."

He began constant adoration of the Blessed Sacrament.

He was also active as a radio amateur with Polish call letters SP3RN where he vilified the Nazi activities over the radio in his reports. Fr. Maximilian continued his publication work including materials considered anti-Nazi and for this activity the presses were shut down and the congregation suppressed. Inevitably the monastery was

watched closely and in 1941 in the only edition of the *Knight* which he was allowed to publish Fr. Kolbe put pen to paper and prompted his own arrest. He wrote,

“No one in the world can change Truth – what we can do and should do is to seek truth and 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?”

On the 17th February 1941 he was finally arrested and sent to the notorious Pawiak prison in Warsaw. A witness there reported that in March an SS guard on seeing the priest in his habit girded with a rosary, asked him if he believed in Christ. He replied calmly that he did. For that he was beaten repeatedly. In May of the same year he was transported along with 300 others to Auschwitz and branded with the number 16670. He was assigned to a special work group staffed by priests and supervised by especially vicious and abusive guards. His calm dedication to the faith brought him the worst jobs available and more beatings than anyone else. It was almost incredible that he survived this brutal treatment with only one lung and poor health. At this time he wrote to his mother,

“Mary gives me strength. All will be well. Do not worry about me or my health for the good Lord is everywhere and holds everyone of us in his great love”.

After a severe beating on one occasion his friends managed to smuggle him to the camp hospital and although suffering greatly he spent the time hearing confessions and spoke to the inmates of the

love of God. Another imprisoned priest, Fr. Zygmunt Ruscak, remembered,

“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.”

Fr. Kolbe continued ministering to the other prisoners, saying Mass in secret using smuggled bread and wine.

Several eyewitnesses to the events that followed were taken as sworn affidavits in the beatification process of Fr. Kolbe.

Tadeusz Joachimowski was a clerk of Block 14A – on the last day of July 1941 after a headcount it was found that three prisoners were missing. SS Commandant Karl Fritzsich announced that ten prisoners would be taken in reprisal and would be assigned to the underground starvation bunker in Block 11.

Jan Jakub Zegidewicz takes up the story – After the group of ten condemned men had been selected a prisoner stepped out from the ranks. I recognised Fr. Kolbe. He spoke directly to Fritzsich and pointed at a non-commissioned officer who was Franciszek Gajowniczek. The latter had been selected and had cried out “Oh my poor wife, my poor children. I shall never see them again”. It was obvious from the expression on Fritzsich’s face that he was surprised at Fr. Kolbe’s action. He had offered himself in the other man’s place. The ten men were marched off to the dreaded Bunker.

Bruno Borgowiec was an assistant to the janitor and an interpreter in the underground Bunkers – In the cell of the poor wretches there were daily loud prayers, the rosary and singing in which prisoners

from the neighbouring 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 only fell silent at the yelling of the visitors. The prisoners begged for food and water which they did not get. Sometimes they were shot to death. Fr. Kolbe bore up bravely; he did not complain or beg but raised the spirits of the others. He was seen kneeling or standing in the centre as he looked into the faces of the SS men. Two weeks passed and one by one they died until only Fr. Kolbe was left. The cell was needed for other prisoners. They called in a common criminal called Bock who gave Fr. Kolbe an injection of carbolic acid in the vein of his left arm. With a prayer on his lips he gave his arm to the executioner. Unable to watch this I left. When I returned I found Fr. Kolbe leaning in a sitting position against the back wall with his eyes open. His face was calm and radiant.

Maximilian Maria Kolbe died on 14th August 1941 at the age of 47 years.

The heroism of Fr. Kolbe went echoing through Auschwitz. In a desert of hatred he had sown love. One witness said that “the atmosphere grew lighter, as this thunderbolt provoked its profound and salutary shock..... it was like a powerful shaft of light in the darkness of the camp”.

“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”.

Indeed, years later, after the war The Polish bishops sent an official letter to the Holy See claiming that Fr. Kolbe’s magazine, the *Knight of the Immaculate* had prepared the Polish nation to endure and survive the horrors of the war that was soon to follow.

The demands for his beatification became insistent and in August 1947 proceedings started; seventy five witnesses were questioned and in 1960 his cause was introduced. In 1971 he was beatified and the opening words of the papal decree introducing the process of beatification were: “Greater love hath no man than this....” Like his master Jesus Christ he had loved his fellow men to the point of sacrificing his life for them.

And it was the Pope from Poland, John Paul II who had the joy of declaring his compatriot a saint on October 10th 1982, in the presence of, Franciszek Gajowniczek, then in his 80’s – the man whose life Fr. Maximilian had saved.

St. Maximilian Kolbe, pray for us