



St. Maximilian Kolbe (O.F.M. Conv.) [1894 – 1941]

Feast Day: August 14

In 1907, Raymond Kolbe and his elder brother Francis decided to join the Conventual Franciscans. They illegally crossed the border between Russia and Austria-Hungary and enrolled at the Conventual Franciscan minor seminary in Lwów. In 1910, Kolbe was allowed to enter the novitiate, where he was given the religious name Maximilian. He professed his first vows in 1911, and final vows in 1914, in Rome, adopting the additional name of Maria, to show his devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Kolbe would later sing hymns to the Virgin Mary in the concentration camp. At the age of 21, Kolbe earned a doctorate in philosophy from the Pontifical Gregorian University. He would also earn a doctorate in theology by the time he was 28.

In 1918, he was ordained a priest and continued his work of promoting Mary throughout Poland. Over the next several years, Kolbe took on publishing. He founded a monthly periodical titled, Knight of the Immaculate. He also operated a religious publishing press and founded a new Conventual Franciscan monastery at Niepokalanow, which became a major religious publishing center.

In 1936, Kolbe's poor health forced him to return home to Poland, and once the WWII invasion by Germany began, he became one of the only brothers to remain in the monastery. He opened up a temporary hospital to aid those in need. When his town was captured, Kolbe was sent to prison but released three months later.

Kolbe refused to sign a document that would recognize him as a German citizen with his German ancestry and continued to work in his monastery, providing shelter for refugees - including hiding 2,000 Jews from German persecution. After receiving permission to continue his religious publishing, Kolbe's monastery acted as a publishing house again and issued many anti-Nazi German publications.

On February 17, 1941, the monastery was shut down; Kolbe was arrested by the German Gestapo and taken to the Pawiak prison. Three months later, he was transferred to Auschwitz.

At the end of July 1941, three prisoners disappeared from the camp, prompting the deputy camp commander, to pick 10 men to be starved to death in an underground bunker in order to deter further escape attempts. When one of the selected men, cried out, "My wife! My children!" Kolbe volunteered to take his place. In his prison cell, Kolbe celebrated Mass each day and sang hymns with the prisoners. He led the other condemned men in song and prayer and encouraged them by telling them they would soon be with Mary in Heaven. Each time the guards checked on him, he was standing or kneeling in the middle of the cell and looking calmly at those who entered. After two weeks of dehydration and starvation, only Kolbe remained alive. The guards wanted the bunker emptied and they gave Kolbe a lethal injection of carbolic acid. Some who were present at the injection say that he raised his left arm and calmly waited for the injection. His remains were cremated on August 15, the feast day of the Assumption of Mary. Kolbe was canonized on October 10, 1982 by Pope John Paul II (now Pope St. John Paul II).