



Reflection Points

Saint Maximilian Kolbe

The story of Maximilian Kolbe

The story begins on 8 January, 1894 - Raymond Kolbe was born in Poland. In his infancy Raymond seems to have been normally mischievous but one day, after his mother had scolded him for some mischief or other, her words took effect and brought about a radical change in his behaviour. Later Raymond explained this change: *'That night I asked the Mother of God what was to become of me. Then she came to me holding two crowns, one white, the other red. She asked 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.'*

From that early age, Kolbe believed and accepted that he was destined for martyrdom. His belief in his dream coloured all his future actions.

In 1910 he became a Franciscan, taking the name Maximilian. After studying in Rome and being ordained in 1919, he built a friary just west of Warsaw. This eventually housed 762 Franciscans and printed eleven periodicals, including a daily newspaper.

In 1930 he went to Asia, where he founded friaries in Nagasaki and in India. In 1936 he was recalled to supervise the original friary near Warsaw. When Germany invaded Poland in 1939, he knew that the friary would be seized, and sent most of the friars home. He was imprisoned briefly and then released, and returned to the friary, where he and the other friars began to organize a shelter for 3,000 Polish refugees, among whom were 2,000 Jews. The friars shared everything they had with the refugees. They housed, fed and clothed them.

Inevitably, the community came under suspicion and was watched closely. Then in May 1941 the friary was closed down and Maximilian and four companions were taken to the deathcamp Auschwitz, where they worked with the other prisoners.

On June 15, 1941, he managed to write a letter to his mother:

'Dear Mama, At the end of the month of May I was transferred to the camp of Auschwitz. Everything is well in my regard. Be tranquil about me and about my health, because the good God is everywhere and provides for everything with love. It would be well that you do not write to me until you will have received other news from me, because I do not know how long I will stay here. Cordial greetings and kisses, affectionately. Raymond.'

Prisoners at Auschwitz were slowly and systematically starved, and their pitiful rations were barely enough to sustain a child. When food was brought, Father Maximilian Kolbe stood aside to let others get the food, and frequently there would be none left for him. At other times he shared his meagre ration of soup or bread with others.

In the harshness of Auschwitz Father Kolbe maintained the gentleness of Christ. At night he moved from bunk to bunk, saying: *'I am a Catholic priest. Can I do anything for you?'*

A prisoner later recalled how he and several others often crawled across the floor at night to be near the bed of Father Kolbe, to make their confessions and ask for consolation. Father Kolbe pleaded with his fellow prisoners to forgive their persecutors and to overcome evil with good. When he was beaten by the guards, he never cried out. Instead, he prayed for his tormentors.

In order to discourage escapes, Auschwitz had a rule that if a man escaped, ten men would be killed in retaliation. In July 1941 a man from Kolbe's bunker escaped. The remaining men of the bunker were led out. They were told that ten men would be locked in the starvation bunker without food or water until they died.

One of the ten selected was Franciszek Gajowniczek, imprisoned for helping the Polish Resistance. He couldn't help a cry of anguish. *'My poor wife!'* he sobbed. *'My poor children! What will they do?'* When he uttered this cry of dismay, Maximilian stepped silently forward, took off his cap, and stood before the commandant and said, *'I am a Catholic priest. Let me take his place. I am old. He has a wife and children.'*

Astounded, the commandant remained silent for a moment, before acceding to the request. Apparently the Nazis had more use for a young worker than for an old one, and were happy to make the exchange. Franciszek Gajowniczek was returned to the ranks, and the priest took his place.

Gajowniczek later recalled:

'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. The news quickly spread all round the camp. It was the first and the last time that such an incident happened in the whole history of Auschwitz.

For a long time I felt remorse when I thought of Maximilian. By allowing myself to be saved, I had signed his death warrant. But now, on reflection, I understood that a man like him could not have done otherwise. Perhaps he thought that as a priest his place was beside the condemned men to help them keep hope. In fact he was with them to the last.'

Father Kolbe was thrown down the stairs of Building 13 along with the other victims and simply left there to starve. Hunger and thirst soon gnawed at the men. Maximilian Kolbe encouraged the others with prayers, psalms, and meditations on the suffering of Christ. After two weeks, only four were alive. The cell was needed for more victims, and the camp executioner came in and injected a lethal dose of cabolic acid into the left arm of each of the four dying men. Kolbe was the only one still fully conscious and with a prayer on his lips, he raised his arm for the executioner.

So it was that Father Maximilian Kolbe was executed on 14 August, 1941 at the age of forty-seven years, a martyr of charity.

The heroism of Father Kolbe went echoing through Auschwitz. In that desert of hatred he had sown love. A survivor Jerzy Bielecki declared that Father Kolbe's death was 'a shock filled with

hope, bringing new life and strength ... It was like a powerful shaft of light in the darkness of the camp.'

The cell where Father Kolbe died is now a shrine. Maximilian Kolbe was beatified as Confessor by Paul VI in 1970, and canonized as Martyr by Pope John Paul II in 1981.

Father Kolbe's incredible deed is an inspiration for all mankind. His life serves as eulogy to the millions who perished in World War II. He did not leave his legacy as an ode to the past - rather as a beacon of hope to the future.