

## St. Maximilian Kolbe the Martyr and Auschwitz

St. Maximilian Kolbe was born as Raymund Kolbe on January 8, 1894, in the Kingdom of Poland, part of the Russian Empire. He was a Polish Conventual Franciscan friar and a martyr in the German death Camp of Auschwitz during World War II.

On February 17, 1941, his 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.

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 dreadful irony of the story is that the escaped prisoner was later found drowned in a camp latrine, so the terrible reprisals had been exercised without cause. But the remaining men of the bunker were led out.

*'The fugitive has not been found!'* the commandant Karl Fritsch screamed. *"You will all pay for this. Ten of you will be locked in the starvation bunker without food or water until they die."* The prisoners trembled in terror. A few days in this bunker without food and water, and a man's intestines dried up and his brain turned to fire.

The ten were selected, including 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 icy-faced Nazi commandant asked, *'What does this Polish pig want?'* Father Kolbe pointed with his hand to the condemned Franciszek Gajowniczek and repeated "I

am a Catholic priest from Poland; I would like to take his place, because he has a wife and children."

Observers believed in horror that the commandant would be angered and would refuse the request, or would order the death of both men. The commandant remained silent for a moment. What his thoughts were on being confronted by this brave priest we have no idea. Amazingly, however, he acceded to the request. Apparently the Nazis had more use for a young worker than for an old one, and was 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.” (Franciszek Gajowniczek).

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. Some drank their own urine, others licked moisture on the dank walls. Maximilian Kolbe encouraged the others with prayers, psalms, and meditations on the Passion of Christ. After two weeks, only four were alive. The cell was needed for more victims, and the camp executioner, a common criminal called Bock, came in and injected a lethal dose of carbolic 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, the last prisoner raised his arm for the executioner. His wait was over ...

A personal testimony about the way Maximilian Kolbe met death is given by Bruno Borgowiec, one of the few Poles who were assigned to render service to the starvation bunker. He told it to his parish priest before he died in 1947: “The ten condemned to death went through terrible days. From the underground cell in which they were shut up there continually arose the echo of prayers and canticles. The man in-charge of emptying the buckets of urine found them always empty. Thirst drove the prisoners to drink the contents. Since they had grown very weak, prayers were now only whispered. At every inspection, when almost all the others were now lying on the floor, Father Kolbe was seen kneeling or standing in the centre as he looked cheerfully in the face of the SS men.”

Father Kolbe never asked for anything and did not complain, rather he encouraged the others, saying that the fugitive might be found and then they would all be freed. One of the SS guards remarked: *this priest is really a great man. We have never seen anyone like him.*

Two weeks passed in this way. Meanwhile one after another they died, until only Father Kolbe was left. This the authorities felt was too long. The cell was needed for new victims. So one day they brought in the head of the sick-quarters, a German named Bock, who gave Father Kolbe an injection of carbolic acid in the vein of his left arm. Father Kolbe, with a prayer on his lips, himself gave his arm to the executioner. Unable to watch this I left under the pretext of work to be done. Immediately after the SS men had left I returned to the cell, where I found Father Kolbe leaning in a sitting position against the back wall with his eyes open and his head drooping sideways. His face was calm and radiant.”



Father Maximilian Kolbe was executed on 14 August, 1941 at the age of forty-seven years. The death certificate, as always made out with German precision, indicated the hour of death 12.30.

Father Kolbe's body was removed to the crematorium, and without dignity or ceremony was disposed of, like hundreds of thousands who had gone before him, and hundreds of thousands more who would follow. 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.

