

St. Maximilian Kolbe

Today, the Church celebrates the great St. Maximilian Kolbe who offered his life for another prisoner at Auschwitz, dying by lethal injection on August 14, 1941.

Instead of presenting his whole life in detail, I will provide a few high-level important points and then talk a little bit about the offering of his life in the concentration camp and the impact that it had on other prisoners.

Born in Poland on January 8, 1894, Maximilian Kolbe (born Raymond Kolbe) had a dream or a vision of the Blessed Virgin Mary when he was just 12 years old. Our Lady presented him with two crowns, white for purity and red for martyrdom. He accepted both.

He entered the Franciscan seminary as a teenager alongside his brother. Maximilian founded the *Militia of the Immaculata* (Knight of the Immaculate) to promote devotion to Mary.

Maximilian was ordained a priest in 1918 and subsequently continued his work of promoting Mary throughout Poland. He began publishing a monthly periodical called "Knight of the Immaculate."

Additionally, Maximilian founded monasteries in Poland, Japan, and India. His monastery in Japan remains a prominent presence of our Catholic faith in that country today.

Maximilian, like so many other heroes during World War II, sheltered thousands of Polish refugees, including many Jews, at his monastery in Poland before his initial arrest by the Nazis in 1939. He was rearrested in 1941 and sent to the Auschwitz death camp, known as the Golgotha of the 20th century. According to some estimates, over one million people lost their lives at Auschwitz.

Maximilian was prisoner #16670. In July 1941, two months after he arrived, a prisoner escaped from the camp. In response, the Nazis selected ten men to be starved to death in a bunker. One of the men, Franciszek Gajowniczek, was chosen and cried out, "My wife! My children!" Ironically, the man's name was the same as the founder of Kolbe's religious order!

Fr. Kolbe offered his life in place of the man. In the bunker, Fr. Kolbe led the nine men in prayer and sang hymns to Mary. He was the last of the group to remain alive. After two weeks of starvation and dehydration, the guards injected Fr. Kolbe with carbolic acid in his arm. He died on August 14, the day before the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Pope Paul VI beatified Fr. Maximilian Kolbe on October 17, 1971. The man Fr. Kolbe saved was present at the beatification. Pope John Paul II canonized Fr. Kolbe on October 10, 1982. St. Maximilian Kolbe is sometimes depicted in his Franciscan habit with a prison uniform covering part of his habit. Pope John Paul II called Fr. Maximilian Kolbe the “patron saint of our difficult century.”

It is heroic people like Fr. Kolbe who help bring God’s light and hope to very dark places. In Viktor Frankl’s famous book, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, he demonstrates that people can endure immense hardship if they have a clear sense of purpose. Forces outside of your control can strip you of everything except your *freedom*, the ability to choose your attitude in difficult circumstances.

According to Frankl, prisoners in concentration camps who lost hope or lacked a future goal to look forward to often gave up and died quickly. For Frankl, the key is not about what *you* expect from life, but rather recognizing what life asks of you. *You* are responsible for answering life’s daily challenges. *You* choose how to bear suffering and grow through it, allowing it to transform you.

In this light, Fr. Kolbe’s witness is *very powerful*. He reveals that you **conquer hatred by love**. Fr. Kolbe’s free choice to give his life shattered the dehumanizing logic of Auschwitz. Fr. Kolbe revealed that prisoners could **maintain an interior sanctuary of peace** even inside a starvation cell. Finally, Fr. Kolbe **gave prisoners hope** in that they did not have to remain passive victims but rather could keep their dignity and freedom, freely choosing to do good and to love, even if only in hidden and small ways.

Remember that you have the same spirit of Fr. Maximilian Kolbe within you! You have the love and power of Christ by virtue of your baptism. You have the freedom to choose to love like Christ, regardless of your circumstances!

~St. Maximilian Kolbe, pray for us!