

Saint of the Month for August 2014

(A monthly series compiled by Tom Quinlan)

Saint Maximilian Kolbe, Priest and Martyr
Thursday, August 14

This month I have chosen Saint Maximilian Mary Kolbe, partly because of an indirect connection with him attained during a 2006 pilgrimage to Central Europe.

He is one of two saints honored this month who were murdered at Auschwitz by the Nazis; more about this point below.

Maximilian was born in Zdunska Wola, in what was then Russian Poland, on January 8, 1894 of humble parents- a laborer and his wife. When he was ten he had a vision of Mary who offered him two crowns- a red one, for martyrdom, and a white one, for purity; he chose both.

He became a Franciscan in Poland (Conventual Franciscans) in 1907, and in 1912 went to Rome to study theology and philosophy at the Pontifical Gregorian University. He became quite active in an effort to spread devotion to Mary by founding a sodality. His group was called the Knights Immaculata (or the Militia of the Immaculate Mary), and was a movement of Marian consecration. He was ordained a priest in 1918.

Returning to Poland he began the popular monthly magazine called, in English, *The Knight of Mary Immaculate*, and in 1927 founded the City of Mary Immaculate, a religious center, in Niepokalanow. I remember seeing a museum about his life and work that is part of a large church in Niepokalanow.

Saint Maximilian spent some time as a missionary in Japan and India before World War II, and founded sister institutions in those countries.

He was arrested in 1939 by the Gestapo for his anti-Naziism. He was released but arrested again in 1941 on charges of aid to Jewish refugees and the Polish underground. He was imprisoned in Warsaw and eventually sent to Auschwitz. While there he volunteered to die in place of an already condemned prisoner, Franciszek Gajowniczek, the father of a large family, and he did so. The Nazis asked a group of prisoners if anyone would volunteer to be a substitute, expecting that no one would say yes, and that their offer was a very black kind of joke, and perhaps another insult to these poor souls.

St. Maximilian was put with other prisoners scheduled to die by starvation, but that took quite a while. During this time he managed to offer some Masses, although it must have been incredibly difficult to get even the most minute quantities of wine.

The others died, but Saint Maximilian was still alive, so he was given a lethal injection of phenol into his heart, which caused his death on August 14, 1941.

The man he saved survived the death camp and the war.

In 2006 Denise and I visited Auschwitz, and couldn't say much of anything for some time afterwards. It really was a place of hell on earth.

The death camps were the "final solution" for the Jewish question- they should be wiped out. However, while millions of Jews were indeed killed at Auschwitz and the other camps, many people do not understand that many others were also deemed worthy of extermination, including Catholic priests and gypsies. At least one of the camps had a Priest Block.

I believe that Auschwitz was originally a camp for the Polish Army, and was taken over by the Nazis after their invasion of Poland in 1939. A gas chamber was built and a crematorium to burn the remains. We walked through the gas chamber, which is a horror movie in person. There was also a chemical factory for a while, built with the idea of getting slave labor from these prisoners.

Eventually the capacity of Auschwitz was too little, and an adjacent, larger death camp was built, Birkenau, with the ability to murder far more people per day.

A small number of people escaped from Auschwitz, although it must have been incredibly difficult, and the percentage of escapees was miniscule. The camp had two rows of barbed wire fences, very high, with tops curving inward; plenty of lights; and plenty of armed guards.

Knowledge of what went on there got out, but the people of the nearby town (Oswiecim) could do nothing to stop the executions. In the early days most people who were sent there did not know too much about what was in store for them. Resistance was futile.

In 2006 a visitor entered the compound by way of a museum with artifacts left from those who died and a graphic summary of what went on. The maps outlined clearly the scale of the operation. You then went into the prison barracks area by walking under a sign that was a cruel lie- "work makes freedom," in German. Death was almost certainly your pay.

We visited one of the barracks, and saw the basement cell where St. Maximilian and some others lived until their death by starvation. Next door was a wall full of bullet holes, the site of special executions (most died by gas). The next building over was where Mengele, the "doctor of death," did his experiments, and perhaps where St. Kolbe died.

He probably knew what he was in for when sent to the camp, and when he volunteered to die in the place of another.

Things happened quite fast at the end of the camp's existence- Russian troops were rushing west and nearing the camp. The Nazis had an almost certain feeling that the end of the Third Reich was close at hand, and that their evil deeds at this and other camps would become more widely known. They blew up almost every bit of Birkenau- all that remains now is the large gate well-known from photographs, and some railroad tracks that brought such a huge number of people to their end. The Nazis also destroyed most of their records of camp operations.

Those who could walk were marched west, toward Germany, and many died on the way.

Such was the environment of horror suffered by Saint Maximilian Kolbe.

Here is a brief excerpt from one of his writings, called *Developing a Forgiving Spirit*:

Mortification is necessary and indispensable for all of us, because by it we secure divine grace for ourselves. Like gold in the furnace, so in the fire of mortification the soul is purified, radiates its own love and becomes more like God, more pleasing to him and therefore more capable of receiving very abundant graces for itself and for others, its poor brothers. What, indeed, can one obtain by love of God without suffering?

He was beatified by Pope Paul VI in 1971. The man he saved attended the beatification. Pope Saint John Paul II proclaimed Maximilian the “Patron of Our Suffering Century.”

The celebration is given the rank of Obligatory Memorial. (**Magnificat**, August 2014; **Daily Roman Missal, Third Edition** (Scepter Publishers); **Encyclopædia Britannica, 15th Edition**)

Collect from the Mass of Saint Maximilian Kolbe:

O God, who filled the Priest and Martyr Saint Maximilian Kolbe with a burning love for the Immaculate Virgin Mary and with a zeal for souls and love of neighbor, graciously grant, through his intercession, that, striving for your glory by eagerly serving others, we may be conformed, even until death, to your Son. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Saint Maximilian Kolbe had great devotion to Mary, an intense adoration of God, and unbelievable courage; he practiced what Jesus himself said and did: “Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). Saint Maximilian Mary Kolbe, pray for us!

Note: This month we also remember Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, born Edith Stein. Some of you may remember her from the *Catholicism* series: the Very Rev. Robert Barron selected her as one of a few modern saints and holy people for one of his episodes. She was executed at Auschwitz in 1942.