

## ST. MAXIMILIAN KOLBE

Young Raymond Kolbe excelled in math and physics. But in his dreams, he was a soldier, conquering the world for the Immaculate Mother.

Born January 8, 1894, the second of five boys in a poor Polish family, Raymond entered a Franciscan friary at 13. Three years later he was admitted to the Order of St. Francis where he was given the name "Maximilian".

As he grew, so did his love for Mary, the Mother of God. In 1917, after receiving communion from the Holy Father, Maximilian devoted his life to Mary and decided to create an association – the Militia Immaculata, or Knights of the Immaculate – to multiply the world's devotion to Mary and, through her, to the sacred heart of Jesus Christ.

Just six men helped lay the foundation for Knights of the Immaculate. But by 1919, the association was flourishing in Krakow and Lwow, Poland. Realizing the pen is mightier than the sword, Fr. Kolbe created a newsletter call *Knight of the Immaculata* to spread the word. Despite financial hardship and Fr. Kolbe's frail health, the *Knight* grew from its original 5,000 circulation, and established itself as a strong voice for Catholics in Poland.

A donation allowed Fr. Maximilian to found Niepokalanow (City of the Immaculate) in 1927. The *Knight's* circulation rose to 65,000, then quickly doubled and tripled. Fr. Kolbe's attempt to print the *Knight* in China failed, but a Japanese version took root as Mugenzai no Sono (Garden of the Immaculate) was established.

In 1936, Fr. Kolbe was called home to Niepokalanow, where 600 faithful now produced an astounding 700,000 copies per issue of the *Knight*, a number that eventually would exceed 1 million. Fr. Kolbe kept his heart focused on God and Mary as the war approached. Many times he was seen embracing the statue of Mary. He seemed to grow more at peace as he cared for the legions of sick people emigrating to Niepokalanow.

In 1939, the Nazis invaded Poland. Niepokalanow was pillaged. Fr. Kolbe was imprisoned on several occasions, repeatedly abused, and once nearly beaten to death. Miraculously, he and the brothers were freed. They returned to Niepokalanow in 1940 to care for war victims, even German soldiers. Despite the German occupation, Fr. Kolbe produced an issue of the *Knight* on the feast of the Immaculata in December. The "Son of Poland" also spurned German citizenship, an offer from Nazis seeking favors.

On May 28, 1941, he was imprisoned in Auschwitz and became prisoner number 16670. Undaunted, Fr. Kolbe continued caring for others, offering them his meager food rations, spiritual guidance, and finally his life.

When 10 prisoners were sentenced to death in retaliation for an escape, a prisoner name Sgt. Francis Gajowniczek pleaded for mercy. Despite hardly knowing the man, Fr. Kolbe offered to take his place in the starvation bunker. There, the tireless Christian soldier led his fellow prisoners in prayer and song for two weeks. On August 14, 1941, the 47 year old priest's life of service to God was ended as guards gave him a lethal injection. His body was incinerated the next day.

**October 17, 1971:** Fr. Maximilian Kolbe was beatified by Pope Paul VI in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome.

**October 10, 1982:** Fr. Maximilian Kolbe was canonized as a saint by Pope John Paul II.