

In the book of Daniel, King Nebuchadnezzar wants Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to commit the sin of idolatry. They refuse to worship a false idol and the angry King tries to punish them by tossing them into a fire that is heated 7 times hotter than normal. Despite the fire, the three sing hymns of praise to God. They appear to be accompanied by an angel who protects them. The miracle helps the evil king to rethink his torture and he praises them for their steadfast faith.

The faith of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego always reminds me of Fr Maximilian Kolbe. In the World War II death camp, he remained steadfast in his faith in the face of imminent death. One guard wanted to sacrifice 10 Jewish men in retaliation for one prisoner who escaped. Fr Maximilian stepped forward to take the place of a family man whose life was then spared. The Nazi's wanted death to be slow and painful for Fr Maximilian and the other nine so they chose to starve them to death. The torturers wanted to make an example of them to prevent further escapes.

Long before the Auschwitz death camp, Fr Maximilian had professed his faith and invoked Mary to help him in all things. As a young man, "Mary came to him in an apparition holding two crowns, indicating for him to choose: one was white, representing purity, the other red, for martyrdom. He chose both."ⁱ In the face of starvation, Fr Maximilian sang hymns of praise to God. His faith was inspiring, and it helped the others facing starvation to have hope in the midst of their situation. "Survivors of the camp testified that the starving prisoners could be heard praying and singing hymns, led by the priest."

Although the priest was Catholic and the other men were Jewish, both faiths share in common the 150 Psalms of the Old Testament.

Out of the depths I call to you, LORD; Lord, hear my cry!

May your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy.

If you, LORD, keep account of sins, Lord, who can stand?

But with you is forgiveness and so you are revered. (Ps 130:1-4).

The guards were a bit like King Nebuchadnezzar. They realized that Fr Maximilian would not give into despair and in fact seemed to be stronger rather than weaker. They recognized the futility of their original plan. Failing to break him, they executed him with a lethal injection.

Jesus calls his disciples to pick up their cross and follow him. Just as Jesus faced injustice and was unjustly condemned to death, history is replete with many martyrs who defied death knowing that it is more important to be obedient to God than to worship an idol or to pass up the opportunity to make a sacrifice for the greater glory of God. If we always keep God before us in our thoughts, and prayers, we too can sing the praises of God in the midst of overwhelming trials and tortures. "If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (Jn 8:31-32).

As we prepare to enter Holy Week, let us keep our thoughts focused on the loving sacrifice of Jesus who willingly laid down his life for our salvation. As the Prophet Isaiah teaches, the Messiah will come "To open the eyes of the blind, to bring out prisoners from confinement, and from the dungeon, those who live in darkness" (42:7).

ⁱ <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/heroism-and-sacrifice-the-catholic-history-of-auschwitz-97544>