

“Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.” These familiar words of the Hail Mary came to life for Maximilian Kolbe at the age of 12 when the Virgin Mother appeared to him in a vision:

That night I asked the Mother of God what was to become of me. Then she came to me holding two crowns, one white, the other red. She asked me if I was willing to accept either of these crowns. The white one meant that I should persevere in purity, and the red that I should become a martyr. I said that I would accept them both.ⁱ

The following year, Maximilian and his older brother Francis entered the minor seminary as teenagers and began over a decade of studies for the priesthood as they joined the Conventual Franciscan Friars.

At the age of 26, he was ordained a priest. In his devotion to Mary, he sought to bring others to Christ through the Blessed Mother. With a small printing press, he began to publish devotional materials. There was a great hunger for this and soon he had to expand the press operations to Warsaw, Poland where he established the City of the Immaculate. Almost 800 friars worked in this mass media apostolate. True to their Franciscan roots, they lived simple lives of evangelic poverty sustained by continuous prayer and spiritual works.

They were united in their mission of evangelizing not only Poland, but the whole world! Day and night, the friars spent themselves in promoting Catholic doctrines, particularly those concerning Our Blessed Lady. They did all this in view of cultivating the need for conversion and sanctification of souls, both on the individual and collective levels, via the mediation of the Blessed Virgin Mary.ⁱⁱ

Publications of the printing apostolate included:

- Knight of the Immaculate - a monthly magazine circulating up to 600,000 copies.
- Little Diary - a daily newspaper eventually reaching a circulation of one million.
- Miscellaneous books, magazines, and pamphlets for people in every walk of life.

Maximilian credited the success to Mary who wanted to touch a countless number of souls by helping each person give birth to a love of Jesus in their hearts.

With a missionary heart, Fr Maximilian traveled to Japan where in the city of Nagasaki, he began a new center for publication of Marian materials. Although there were a number of cultural mountains to climb, within a month this much smaller Franciscan City of the Immaculate was able to begin printing a Japanese version of the Knight of the Immaculate.

With the rise of Fascism in Europe and the onset of World War II, the Nazi's suppressed the printing apostolate in Poland. Amidst the harsh conditions of war, the original City of the Immaculate turned its attention to caring for the growing number of refugees and displaced Jewish families. In ministering to the victims of war, Maximilian taught everyone “to forgive their enemies, and to acknowledge that hatred is destructive, and love alone is creative.”ⁱⁱⁱ

In February of 1941, The Gestapo put a halt to his wartime ministry in Warsaw. Like countless numbers of Jews, he was sent to the Nazi death camp in Auschwitz. Confronted with sheer evil, he remained faithful to his calling of showing there is a God and that love and hope exist in the darkest corners of the world.

In July of 1941, a prisoner escaped, and the barracks commander was intent on making sure no one else tried. He selected 10 men to starve to death. Having chosen the red crown of martyrdom at the age of 12, Maximilian exchanged his life for a Jewish family man who had a wife and children. Uniting his suffering with that of Christ on the cross, he maintained a prayerful disposition and tried to raise the spirits of others similarly condemned to die by deprivation of food and water. When starvation failed, the soldiers injected him with a lethal

dose of poison. He earned his martyr's crown on the vigil of Our Lady's Assumption into heaven. "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death."

On October 10, 1982, Pope John Paul II declared Fr Maximilian Kolbe a Saint of the Church. "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (Jn 15:12). The surviving prisoners from Auschwitz who attended the Canonization Mass whole heartedly agreed.

ⁱ catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=370

ⁱⁱ saintmaximiliankolbe.com/biography

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