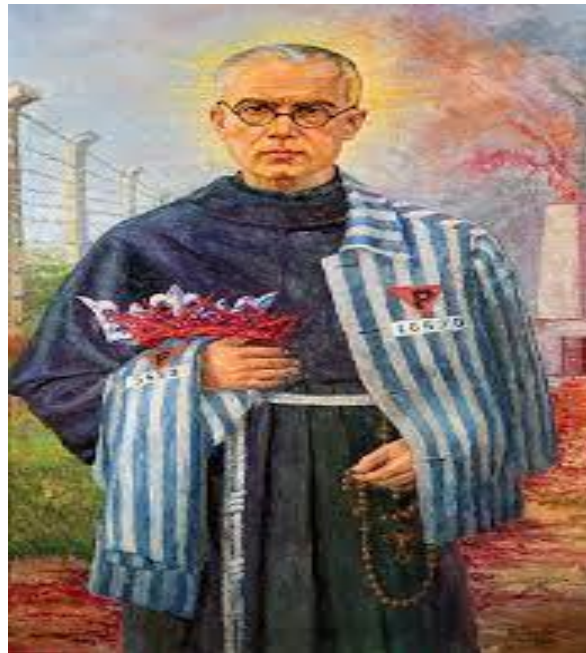


# REGIONAL FORMATION: SUMMER STUDY ON FRANCISCAN SAINTS

## ST. MAXIMILLIAN KOLBE



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## **ST. MAXIMILLIAN KOLBE**

Happy summer, brothers and sisters.

My name is Joe Scalise and I am a member of the Servant of God Thea Bowman Emerging Fraternity where I serve as Vice-minister and Formation Director. During my Initial Formation period I was seeking modern day Franciscan Saints as examples of how to live in our present-day world. I chose the name Maximillian at my profession as a Secular Franciscan after reading a book on St. Maximilian Mary Kolbe.

While I had heard stories of St. Maximilian Kolbe's heroic sacrifice of substituting his life for another prisoner at Auschwitz Nazi Concentration camp, accepting certain death, I came to learn that his life before that event was very worthy of sainthood, a man who lived a virtuous life.

St. Maximilian Kolbe was born as Raymund Kolbe on January 8, 1894, in the Kingdom of Poland, part of the Russian Empire. St. Maximilian was very active in promoting the Immaculate Virgin Mary and is known as the Apostle of Consecration to Mary. Much of his life was strongly influenced by a vision he had of the Virgin Mary when he was 12. "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."

One year after his vision, Kolbe and his elder brother, Francis joined the Conventual Franciscans. In 1910, Kolbe was given the religious name Maximilian, after being allowed to enter the novitiate, and in 1911, he professed his first vows.

At the age of 21, Kolbe earned a doctorate in philosophy from the Pontifical Gregorian University. He would also earn a doctorate in theology by the time he was 28. Towards the end of his studies, Kolbe suffered his first bout of tuberculosis and he became quite ill, often coughing up blood; the illness disrupted his studies. Throughout the rest of his life, he experienced poor health, but never complained, seeing his illness as an opportunity to 'suffer for Mary'.

In 1918, he was ordained a priest and continued his work of promoting Mary throughout Poland. Over the next several years, Kolbe took on publishing. He founded a monthly periodical titled, "Rycerz Niepokalanej" (Knight of the Immaculate). He also operated a religious publishing press and founded a new Conventual Franciscan monastery at Niepokalanow, which became a major religious publishing center.

He felt a strong motivation to 'fight for Mary' against enemies of the church. It was Kolbe who sought to reinvigorate and organize the work of the MI (Militia Immaculata). Kolbe helped the Immaculata Friars to publish high pamphlets, books and a daily newspaper – *Maly Dziennik*. The

monthly magazine grew to have a circulation of over 1 million and was influential amongst Polish Catholics. Kolbe even gained a radio license and publicly broadcast his views on religion. Kolbe was successful in using the latest technology to spread his message.

As well as writing extensive essays and pieces for the newspaper, Kolbe composed the *Immaculata Prayer* – the consecration to the immaculately conceived Virgin Mary.

Kolbe also founded monasteries in both Japan and India. To this day, the monastery in Japan remains prominent in the Roman Catholic Church in Japan.

Kolbe refused to sign a document that would recognize him as a German citizen with his German ancestry and continued to work in his monastery, providing shelter for refugees - including hiding 2,000 Jews from German persecution. After receiving permission to continue his religious publishing, Kolbe's monastery acted as a publishing house again and issued many anti-Nazi German publications.

On February 17, 1941, the monastery was shut down; Kolbe was arrested by the German Gestapo and taken to the Pawiak prison. Three months later, he was transferred to Auschwitz. Never abandoning his priesthood, Kolbe was the victim to severe violence and harassment. Toward the end of his second month in Auschwitz, men were chosen to face death by starvation to warn against escapes. Kolbe was not chosen but volunteered to take the place of a man with a family. It is said during the last days of his life Kolbe led prayers to Our Lady with the prisoners and remained calm. He was the last of the group to remain alive, after two weeks of dehydration and starvation. The guards gave him a lethal injection of carbolic acid. The stories tell that he raised his left arm and calmly awaited death.

St. Maximilian Kolbe died on August 14 and his remains were cremated on August 15, the same day as the Assumption of Mary feast day. Kolbe was beatified as Confessor of the Faith in 1971. He was canonized as a martyr by Pope John Paul II (who himself lived through the German occupation of Poland) in 1981. Pope John Paul II decided that Kolbe should be recognized as a martyr because the systematic hatred of the Nazi regime was inherently an act of hatred against religious faith, meaning Kolbe's death equated to martyrdom. At his canonization, in 1982 Pope John Paul II said: "Maximilian did not die but gave his life ... for his brother."

St. Maximilian's life was one of living virtuously. His 'yes' to follow God's will models Mary's 'yes'. He used every gift he was given to build the church, especially calling on the intercession of Mary. He left everything to follow Jesus as is evidenced in his founding of monasteries, establishing the MI periodical, and giving his life for another. Throughout his life he displayed the Gospel poverty as did St. Francis.

I was taken by St. Maximilian's love of poverty. He surrendered all he was and had to follow Jesus with the constant intercession of Mary. My desire to follow the Rule of our Way of Life as St. Maximilian did in following Francis, in my own life, saying 'yes' to God's commands for me.

As Franciscans we can follow both St. Maximilian's and St. Francis' desire to be full of grace so that we can hear and discern God's call, then seek the intercession of Mary in our daily life to answer that call living a virtuous life. They shall know us by our fruits!