

## **St. Maximilian Kolbe – For the Life of Another**

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9-10<sup>th</sup> Grade Category, Second Place**

“Rise!” As the Lagerfuhrer enters the bunker, cold terror sets into the heart of every man in the room. The arrival of the Lagerfuhrer at this time of day can only mean one thing: death. He makes his way down the path of crude beds with the heavy step of combat boots, eyeing each man like a cut of meat, the prisoners careful not to look him in the eyes. “You, come here!” he barks at a man stricken pale with worry. To eight other men he gives the same command. When he makes his selection for the tenth and final man, all unselected men breathe a sigh of relief. The unbearable silence of fear is broken when the last man cries out, pleading for his life for the sake of his wife and children. He is met only with the hostility of the German officer. Just as the man has given up hope, another steps forward and offers to take his place. Astonished, the first man agrees and returns, with a heavy heart of gratitude, to the group of men whose death has not been decided. For many, the horror of this story was a reality. Men and women were selected to die, knowing they were leaving behind spouses and children. Few would receive the gift of a complete stranger offering his life for their own. Saint Maximilian Kolbe, an extraordinary figure in history, was one of the few willing to sacrifice his life for another.

Rajmund Kolbe was born into a middle class German family to Juliusz Kolbe and Marianna Kolbe, in the town of Zdunska Wola, Russia. A few short years later, the little German family uprooted and relocated in Pabianice, Poland. It was there Rajmund became a man of God. Rajmund and Franciszek, his older brother, were moved to join the Franciscan order in 1907(Maximilian Kolbe). To do so was not an easy task, especially since Rajmund had never fully regained his strength from an earlier bout of tuberculosis (Lovasik). The two brothers had to first cross the Russia / Austro-Hungary border illegally to reach the junior seminary in Lwow, Austro-Hungary. After five years of studying the faith and philosophy, he took the new name Maximilian. He made his final vows three years later. The same year Maximilian took his final vows, his father joined the Polish Legion, a group that fought for Poland’s independence.

Although Rajmund’s father did nothing but fight for a just cause, he was killed by the Russians for his crusade. One can only assume that this monumental event was the seed that blossomed into Rajmund’s generosity and his pursuit of righteousness. Rajmund indeed followed in his father’s footsteps in laying down his life for a just cause.

Maximilian set up his final residence in the Niepokalanow Friary during World War II where he helped to provide refuge to more than 2,000 Jews. Taking on such a mission was a risk to Maximilian’s life, but a risk he was willing to take. His mission finally proved fatal when, on February 17, 1941, he was arrested by the Gestapo. After imprisonment, Maximilian was sentenced to Auschwitz , synonymous to a death sentence. Two months after Maximilian’s arrival at the prison camp, a man from his bunker

attempted to escape. At Auschwitz , it did not matter who committed the crime as long as someone was punished. Consequently, ten men from Maximilian's and the escapee's bunker were selected for punishment. The punishment this time: starvation until death. The Lagerfuhrer entered the bunker and randomly selected ten men, oblivious to the men's families and loved ones.

A man begs not to be put to death, crying that he has a wife and children. One could only imagine the battle fought in the consciences of every unselected man in the bunker: *I could take his place, but then I would die*. One man chose to give the man life in place of his own. Maximilian Kolbe chose to be starved to death in hopes that Franciszek Gajowniczek could one day return to his family. Along with the nine other men, Maximilian entered the starvation chamber, Block 11, where he remained for two weeks. Remarkably, four men were still left at the end of this period of torture. Action was taken to induce a faster death, and the men were injected in the heart with carbolic acid.

Maximilian Kolbe was not only a remarkable man, aiding the oppressed and standing up for what he believed in, he was and is a venerable soul. One can only imagine the pain and suffering Maximilian endured throughout his lifetime, ending in tragedy and heroism. His actions were not only recognized by those in Auschwitz, but by the Catholic Church. Franciszek Gajowniczek attended Maximilian Kolbe's canonization by Pope John Paul II in 1982. Even though St. Maximilian is not of this world, one can imagine that he still helps to bear the suffering of the oppressed and wrongfully imprisoned (Maximilian Kolbe).

When I hear St. Maximilian's story, my first thought is that I could never do something like that. But after a second thought, while I may not have done something as extraordinary as St. Maximilian, there are other things I have done that quietly hold the same merit. Around fifth grade, a new friend, Betty\*, joined my group and another friend, Sue\*, didn't like it. Sue went out of her way to torment Betty, and eventually me. I stayed true to both friends and stood up whenever Sue would hurt Betty. This kept going on and eventually I lost my friendship with Sue, a long time best friend. Even though Betty ended up leaving that school, I knew what I had done made a difference to her and that she will look back later and be thankful. I hope to carry on the legacy of St. Maximilian Kolbe, not in extraordinary acts, but in ordinary acts of this extraordinary life. We choose what we do with our life. Choose well.

\*Names have been changed.

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