

St Maximilian Maria Kolbe, patron saint of families, prisoners, journalists, political prisoners, those with drug addictions and the pro-life movement.

St Maximilian Kolbe was born as Raymund Kolbe on January 8, 1894, in Poland, which was then part of the Russian Empire. Much of Kolbe's life was strongly influenced by a vision he had of the Virgin Mary when he was 12. He recalled: "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." A year later, Kolbe and his elder brother, Francis joined the Conventual Franciscans. He was ordained in 1918 and was given the religious name Maximilian.

At the age of 21, Kolbe earned a doctorate in philosophy from the Pontifical Gregorian University, and then a doctorate in theology by the time he was 28. Kolbe was very active in promoting devotion to Mary, so much so that he is known as the Apostle of Consecration to Mary. He also took on publishing, and then founded a new Conventual Franciscan monastery at Niepokalanow in Poland, which became a major religious publishing centre. Kolbe also opened monasteries in India and Japan.

In 1936, Kolbe returned to Poland because of ill health. WW II had broken out, Kolbe's town was captured by Germany; and despite refusing to sign as a German, Kolbe remained at his monastery, continued to publish anti-Nazi publications, and provided shelter for refugees, including some 2000 – 3000 Jews. 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, including hearing confessions and celebrating Mass with smuggled bread, meant Kolbe was the victim of severe violence and harassment. He was always found kneeling in prayer in his cell. Toward the end of his second month in Auschwitz, 10 men were chosen to face death by starvation to warn prisoners against escaping. Kolbe was not chosen, but volunteered to take the place of a man, Franciszek Gajowniczek, who had a family. After three weeks, Kolbe was still alive and so was lethally injected with 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. 1982 Pope John Paul II canonised Kolbe and declared him a martyr of charity. Franciszek Gajowniczek, the man Kolbe saved at Auschwitz, survived the Holocaust and was present as a guest at both the beatification and the canonisation ceremonies.

St Maximilian Kolbe is one of ten 20th-century martyrs who are depicted in statues above the Great West Door of Anglican Westminster Abbey, London. His feast day is celebrated on 14 August. (*Liturgy Committee*)