

Maximilian Kolbe

Raymond Kolbe was born in Zdunska-Wola, Poland, in 1894. He came from a poor Catholic family and his parents were weavers. His parents taught Raymond to love Jesus, that Jesus was his friend. Raymond worked hard at school he especially loved maths and science. He was interested in space travel and designed a space rocket. This was long before any such thing existed.

He thought and prayed about his life; should he be a scientist or not. Eventually he knew that God was asking him to follow him in a special way. He joined the Franciscans and took the name of Maximilian. He was ordained as a priest in 1918.

Father Maximilian wanted everyone to know and love Jesus and he had a very special love for Mary the mother of Jesus. He started a Centre near Warsaw in Poland where people could find out more about the Good News of Jesus. He opened a printing shop where he produced a monthly magazine to send out to people. He knew that a lot of people listened to the radio so he started a radio station, which broadcast prayers and information about the Catholic faith. Father Maximilian was using his gift of understanding science and technology to help people become friends of Jesus.

All this was happening at about the same time as Adolf Hitler and his Nazis were trying to take over Europe. They did not like anyone who was trying to do good. In 1939 Father Maximilian was arrested by the Gestapo; that is a particularly cruel section of the Nazis' group. They questioned him and released him. He returned to his Friary, where he and the other friars sheltered 3000 Polish people and 1500 Jewish people. During this time he continued to publish his magazine to encourage people to put their trust in God who would be always with them no matter what happened.

In 1941 he was arrested again and taken to Auschwitz concentration camp. This was a terrible place the prisoners were very badly and cruelly treated, they were not given enough to eat, were often beaten and lived crowded together in wooden huts.

In spite of the terrible conditions Father Maximilian would say Mass, with bread and wine that had been smuggled into the camp. He encouraged people to be loving and forgiving, to try to overcome evil with love and goodness. Father Maximilian was well known in the camp for his kindness he always put other people first and took what was left over.

One day a man in Father Maximilian block escaped. As a punishment the guards made all the prisoners stand still outside all day in the sun without food or water, whilst they searched for the escaped man. They did not find him so at the end of the day the camp Commandant said he would kill ten men in place of the one who had escaped. One of those chosen begged to be spared because he had a wife and family at home. Father Maximilian stepped forward and said that he would take his place, and asked the Commandant to spare the man. His offered was accepted.

The condemned men were put into a cellar and starved to death. Father Maximilian tried to comfort the others; they said the Rosary and sang hymns. Father Maximilian died in 1941 on August 14th eve of the feast of the Assumption of Our Lady into Heaven. On October 10, 1982, Pope John Paul II canonised him Saint Maximilian Kolbe, a martyr.

Questions to think about:

1. What were Maximilian gifts? How did he use them for God?
2. Maximilian wanted to tell everyone about the good news of Jesus, how could you do that in your life?
3. Maximilian was a brave and courageous person at a time when there was great danger. Where do you think he got his courage and strength from?
4. Have you ever been in the position where you have been able to help someone by being brave? How did you feel and what helped you?
5. Maximilian was a martyr. What is a martyr? How was he one?
6. Why would the date of the day of Maximilian's death have been special to him?