



ARTYKUŁ

Friar, editor, martyr

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During the counting assembly on July 29th 1941, the deputy commandant Karl Fritzsch pointed to ten prisoners, who were to die of starvation. It was a punishment – as well as warning to others – for the escape attempt of one of the prisoners of the KL Auschwitz concentration camp. Among those, who were to die of hunger was one volunteer.

Sacrifice of life

In the camp, he was registered as prisoner no. 16670. His name was Maximillian Maria Kolbe.

He had been in the German camp for only two months. Nonetheless, he managed to make his presence known. His fellow inmates, who were lucky enough to survive the war, told many stories about the Franciscan. Priest Konrad Szweda talked about his resilience and the support he gave to the prisoners, but also about his work as a priest, which he went through with despite being told not to do so – he taught, gave confessions, blessed. **Kazimierz Piechowski**, a famous escapee from Auschwitz, was in the same bloc as father Maximillian. He recalled, that the Franciscan lifted his spirit the first time they met. He encouraged not to lose hope. From the account of many witnesses, e.g. Piechowski, we know what happened at the assembly during which father Kolbe laid down his life as a sacrifice.

The assembly at bloc 14 was gathered after one of the prisoners escaped. The German crew applied collective responsibility, as they usually did after a successful escape. Following a long wait, the prisoners learned, that ten of them were to die of starvation as revenge for the escapee. The officers of the SS, among others the deputy for the camp's commandant Rudolf Hoess, Karl Fritzsch and Gerhard Palitzsch, began choosing the inmates. One of those to die, a nearly 40 years old soldier, Franciszek Gajowniczek, began begging for mercy. He screamed not to kill him and that he has a wife and children. Then, one of the prisoners stepped out of the line on his own. Silently, but firmly, he proposed to Fritzsch to take him instead of Gajowniczek. This gesture, baffled for a moment even the commandant known for his cruelty. Father Maximillian's offer was accepted. This scene, shown on many paintings, prints, silver and TV screens; told in memoirs, novels, theatre plays and historical books as an example of a single individual's heroism in the face of totalitarianism, forever entered the Polish culture.

“The story about father Maximillian's heroic act circled around the prisoners. With some of them, it reached the Dachau camp as well. In 1943, brochures with the martyr's story and a request for prayers for his beatification appeared in Jerusalem and Padua. His story became more widespread after both Auschwitz and Dachau were liberated.”

The prisoners sentenced to death were moved to bloc 11, where the camp's jail was. In a hunger bunker, despite extreme dehydration, starvation and a lung illness, Kolbe survived for more than two weeks. His fellow inmates wrote in their memoirs, how he sung prayers and book of hours while being there. Father Maximillian died on August 14th 1941, ended off with a phenol injection. His body was cremated on the next

day.

First news of his martyr death left the camp thanks to father Ludwik Pius Bartosik, arrested along with the editor of the "Knight of the Immaculata", currently beatified. He sent a letter to Niepokalanów, in which he wrote: "I was very impressed by the death of father Maximillian". The camp crew; however, hadn't sent an official information to his chapter about his death until January 1942. Meanwhile, the story about father Maximillian's heroic act circled around the prisoners. With some of them, it reached the Dachau camp as well. In 1943, brochures with the martyr's story and a request for prayers for his beatification appeared in Jerusalem and Padua. His story became more widespread after both Auschwitz and Dachau were liberated. Already in the first, post-war issue of the "Knight of the Immaculata" from July 1945, there was an incomplete information about the circumstances of father Maximillian's perish. Following this publication, more and more witnesses started to surface, among them the saved Franciszek Gajowniczek. His whole life, he was strongly attached to the monastery in Niepokalanów. When he passed away in 1995, he became one of the two secular people (along with the monastery's donor, prince Jan Drucki-Lubecki) buried at the local monastic cemetery. Shortly after the war had ended, there were also books written about the life and death of father Kolbe, e.g. by Gustaw Morcinek and Jan Dobraczyński.



**Father Maximilian Maria Kolbe
with students of the lower
seminary**

Two crowns

Rajmund, because that was the name father Maximillian received at his christening, was born on January 8th 1894 in Zduńska Wola, near Łódź. His father was of German descent, his mother was Polish. He was the second of five brothers. After a few years, the Kolbe family moved to Pabianice. All biographers stressed the unique devotion of the family. Undoubtedly, the environment in which Rajmund grew up had a substantial impact on his way of life. His mother described, after he had already died, in a letter to the Franciscans, how he experienced a revelation of Holy Mary when he was still just a child. During a prayer after the communion, the mother of Christ showed to him with two crowns – a white one and a red one. They were to symbolise a choice of a way of life: the white crown – chastity (the path of a priest), and the red crown – a martyr's death.

The young boy was to choose... both. The motive of the two crowns became one of the recognisable symbols of father Maximillian Kolbe. Following his martyr's end, it was pictured on many representations of him. It also found its way to the crest of the Teresin province, where Niepokalanów is.

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The breakthrough moment in Rajmund's life was taking part in mission teachings, in 1907, of Franciscans who came all the way from Lviv. He and his brother decided to join them. It wasn't easy, since Lviv was part of Galicia at the time, which belonged to the Austrian-Hungarian empire. They travelled with their dad, who was the only one with a passport. It's not clear, how the boys passed the control checks. Most probably, they did so illegally - with the help of a local farmer, who smuggled them through the green border to a fixed place, where their dad was waiting for them. They both began studying in the Little Seminary, and then joined the Conventual Franciscans. Rajmund took on the chapter name Maximillian. It wasn't chosen randomly. Originating from the Latin word *maximus* (the biggest) very accurately described his ambitious character and determination in reaching his goals. The fact, that Franciscans are referred to as "Friars Minor" (Lat. *minores*) showed his deep personality.

Soon, Maximillian and several other brothers were sent to Rome to study, where he came back from with two PHDs. He graduated philosophy at the legendary Pontifical Gregorian University, where many Poles studied at the time, and at the newly founded, Franciscan college *Seraphicum* - theology. He spent the years of the First World War at the Eternal City. He was ordained there too, on April 28th 1918.

Knight of the Immaculata

While in Rome, he also began one of his life's works - in 1917, with a few brothers, he founded the Knighthood of the Immaculata (Lat. *Militia Immaculatae*, MI in abbreviation) - mass in conception mission organisation, set to gather the faithful from all around the world. In the first draft of the statute, he formulated its goal: "To try to convert sinners, heretics, schismatics etc., and first and foremost masons; also to sanctify everyone under the care of the Immaculate Virgin Mary.

Father Maximilian often stressed, that “Militia wasn’t any organisation, but a movement inspiring the masses, freeing them of Satan’s claws.”

The impulse to create the mission was the apparent atheisation and activity of masonry in Rome. The association of international and mission character is still operating to this day and gathers those, who want to cultivate the cult of Holy Mary. At first, it only consisted of clergymen, but since 1920 it also welcomed secular people. Father Maximilian often stressed, that “Militia wasn’t any organisation, but a movement inspiring the masses, freeing them of Satan’s claws.”

Its founder established three forms of membership: the primary one, non-organised, based on prayer engagement (described as MI-1); the second one, based on spiritual clubs e.g. in parishes (MI-2); and finally the one based on apostolic commitment (MI-3). Members of the movement call themselves Knights. Its main, international facility is the one near the Niepokalanów monastery. One of its signature marks and a way of operating was the promotion of the so-called miraculous medallion connected with the cult of the Immaculate Conception of Holy Mary. The medallion pictured Holy Mary in her Immaculate image, standing on top of the globe and stomping a snake’s head, with beams of light coming from her hands, symbolising graces one could receive through her. The cult of the medallion began in the first half of the 19th century by Saint Catherine Labouré. Wearing it, was to testify to entrusting one’s own life to the care of Holy Mary. Maximilian Kolbe was a devoted propagator of this form of piety, and the Franciscans continued his work after the war producing and distributing the medallion on a massive scale.



Franciscans working in the printing house / Photo from the archives of Niepokalanów

Franciscans

Return to country

He held his first Holy Mass still in Rome, but he returned to Poland in 1919. He arrived to Cracow, where he was immediately assigned to teach in a Catholic seminary. Unfortunately, his work was substantially interrupted by an advancing tuberculosis. Not giving up in the face of such serious disease, he cultivated the traditions of the Knighthood of the Immaculata, also among the secular. In 1922, Kolbe began publishing the “Knight of the Immaculata” monthly, which became an official body of the association. Similarly to all his enterprises, father Kolbe started with nothing at first, when taking on the work of a publisher. Every new task, he realised personally, often lacking proper qualifications, but thanks to his unshaken faith and consequence in taking action, he quickly gained the needed experience.

The “Knight of the Immaculata” was born in pain. It was difficult to get the approval of the father superiors, and it was even harder to get the funding for the production, print and distribution of each issue. Taking on the fight for the new paper, Maximilian couldn't have known, that he was about to start one of his most important life journeys. Soon, his publishing work became his trademark.

The editorial office was moved to Grodno, where a modest publishing house came to life. The popularity of the monthly paper gradually rose. At first, it sold 5 thousand copies; after two years the number doubled. It was a paper consisting of mainly religious content and partially of regular journalist pieces. What stood out, was its low price and interesting, easy to understand articles.

Niepokalanów

A decade after creating the Knighthood of the Immaculata, father Kolbe moved from the Borderlands to near Warsaw. There, he began the construction of a new Franciscan monastery and an editorial office at the lands of the Teresin estate, near Sochaczew, which he received from prince Jan Drucki-Lubecki. He started with placing the statue of Holy Mary, which to this day welcomes guests coming to Niepokalanów. The location is well situated – 40 km away from Warsaw, neighbouring the railway line to Poznań. All the formalities were taken care of in the half of 1927, and already on November 21st the editorial office of the “Knight of the Immaculata” began working with little resources. The number of sold copies rose even more over the following years; shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War, it had already reached a million. A special version of the monthly paper was also published for children – the “Little Knight of the Immaculata”. In time, Niepokalanów became a substantial religious press publishing centre. Two monthly magazines were published there, and since 1930s, a daily one as well (“Little Daily”), along with books and novels. The Niepokalanów press, which could be described as social-religious, had a massive reach. The most read secular papers could count on barely a fourth of the number of readers of the “Knight”. A separate article could be written on the analysis of its content, including the discussion around the accusations of anti-Semitism.

Focusing on father Maximilian himself, it's worth stressing that the subject of Jews wasn't the most important one for him. In his teachings, he concentrated mainly on mission activities and spiritual development.

The Department for Religion wondered, how to use the canonisation for the Communists' purposes. It considered sending a Polish radio-television crew and transmitting the ceremonies. It was suggested, to portray the new saint in the wide context of fascism, exposure of the cruelty of war and the "issues of fighting for freedom and disarmament".

The facility in Niepokalanów had a modern printing infrastructure, serving both the editorial and the distribution network, led also by the Knighthood of the Immaculata. In the 30s, the organisation came up with new initiatives - e.g. the monastic Voluntary Fire Guard, which operates to this day, as well as began trying for a radio concession. Father Maximilian also got interested in new evangelisation possibilities which television offered. For the needs of the editorial office, he planned the construction of a small airport. Preparations for the construction of the church were also ongoing. Father Kolbe wanted Niepokalanów to be economically self-efficient. Hence, the Franciscans even built their own power plant, took care of a huge vegetable garden; they specialised in various fields - tailoring, hairdressing, even medicine. The monastery; however, did not develop only materially. In the pre-war period, it engaged in an intense apostolic activity. It was done especially by developing the Knighthood of the Immaculata. Father Maximilian kept close with members of the association, subscribers of the paper and other sympathisers, among other things, writing letters to them regularly. As Niepokalanów grew, on August 23rd 1939, the Warsaw Franciscan province came to life. Before the outbreak of the war, 760 friars lived in Niepokalanów.

At the same time, father Maximilian Kolbe managed to establish a Japanese Niepokalanów in Nagasaki (Mugenzai no Sono), where between 1930-1935 he led the mission activity. Not knowing the language, he also began publishing a Japanese "Knight of the Immaculata" ("Seibo no Kishi"). He wrote the articles in Latin, for the Japanese priests to translate. The monastery miraculously survived the atomic bomb attack on Nagasaki in 1945. Franciscans from Niepokalanów, led missions to China and India too.

Second Great War

The outbreak of the war stopped the dynamic growth of Niepokalanów. The construction of the church was

interrupted and the distribution of the papers seized as the Germans stole the printing equipment. Father Kolbe managed to send most of the brothers to their homes, before getting arrested with other priests in September 1939. He ended up in a temporary camp (Dulag D) in Amtitz, where he was held until December. When he returned to Niepokalanów after more than two months, he found the monastery plundered. However, he did not give up and tried publishing the “Knight of the Immaculata” again. His correspondence with the occupying German officials in Sochaczew remained. It says, that he managed to get permission for publishing only one issue of the paper between 1940 and 1941. On February 17th 1941, father Maximilian Kolbe was detained by the gestapo and put into the Pawiak prison in Warsaw. One of the hypotheses for the reason behind the arrest, was that it was due to the publishing of the aforementioned issue of the “Knight”, where father Maximilian put a bold article about truth. Three months later, he was sent to the KL Auschwitz concentration camp.

After the war

During the war, at the Niepokalanów monastery taken by the Germans, there was a shelter of the Polish Red Cross and a conspiracy school. The friars helped the local population, refugees from near Poznań, a group of hiding Jews and later the Warsaw insurgents.

After the war, devoid of their founder and the guardian of the community, they returned to their everyday routine. Just as other chapters, taking advantage of the Communist authorities being preoccupied with fighting the political opposition and the anti-Communist armed resistance, they focused on repairing the pre-war *status quo*. They managed to bring back their publishing activities; they also produced devotional articles, putting much effort into the production and promotion of the Miraculous Medallion. In the middle of the 1950s, the new church was consecrated.

Road to sanctity

Niepokalanów, despite being carefully observed by the Communist authorities and repressed in various ways, was still growing. Its importance as the place of cult of the Holy Mary grew as well (already in the 1960s it was described as a sanctuary both by the Church and state officials), but first and foremost, it became the place of cult of its founder. On October 17th 1971, father Maximilian Maria Kolbe was beatified, and almost 11 years later, on October 10th 1982, canonised.

Preparations for the beatification took place during a general renaissance of religious life in Poland – shortly after the Second Vatican Council had ended, during the celebrations of the millennium of the Christening of Poland and the peregrination of the icon of the Black Madonna of Częstochowa. The beatification itself, although inherently connected to Niepokalanów, was not a local nor even entirely a religious event. Its importance should be considered in an international context – of building Polish-German relations and the Polish People’s Republic starting talks with the Holy See. The name of father Maximilian was mentioned in a memorable letter of the Polish episcopacy to the German episcopacy, in 1965. What’s more, the bishops of Poland and Germany issued a shared memorial, signed by cardinal Stefan Wyszyński and cardinal Julius

Doepfner, in which they expressed their admiration to father Kolbe's sacrifice and declared shared striving for unity. According to the Church sources, around 6 thousand Poles came for the beatification Mass, held on October 17th 1971 at the St. Peter's basilica, in Rome. The Department for Religion, proposed that between 1250-1500 priests should be allowed to leave the country for the beatification. There were also plans for the organisation of the "trip from Poland for the beatification ceremonies", which was a massive, logistic enterprise. Poles living abroad attended the Mass in huge numbers. Many places in Poland held gratuitous Masses during that time. Two days prior to the beatification, the director of the IV Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs sent an encrypted note, in which he ordered the local Communist authorities to remain especially vigilant during all prayers and religious gatherings in the country (especially in Niepokalanów), and to send reports on their course, the priests' homilies, and the altar decorations until midnight of October 17th.



The primate of Poland card. Stefan Wyszyński with bishops and Franciscans in front of the beatification portrait of father Maximilian Kolbe

The canonisation of father Maximilian Maria Kolbe took place under much harsher circumstances, since Poland was under the martial law. Mieczysław Rakowski wrote about the complicated situation of primate Józef Glemp in his *"Political Journals"*. The Department for Religion wondered, how to use the canonisation for the Communists' purposes. It considered sending a Polish radio-television crew and transmitting the ceremonies. It was suggested, to portray the new saint in the wide context of fascism, exposure of the cruelty of war and the "issues of fighting for freedom and disarmament". Similarly to the beatification, a pilgrimage to Rome was organised. It was proposed to first send the former prisoners from concentration camps and the decorated Red Cross activists. Any non-state initiatives were anticipated too. Lots of funds were given to the "Ars Christiana" distributor for the production of the commemorative articles, with an order to have patriotic accents on them, to avoid the pilgrims preparing their own, anti-Communist slogans and pictures. Niepokalanów was visited by pope John Paul II during his second pilgrimage to Poland (between June 16-23,

1983). On June 18th, the Polish pope held a gratuitous Holy Mass there, thanking for the canonisation. The huge crowds gathered at Niepokalanów for the occasion were even mentioned in the *"Journals"*... by Mieczysław Rakowski.

The canonisation of father Maximilian Kolbe forced the Communist state to change its policies towards both Niepokalanów and Catholic chapters in general. The authorities had to join in on the official celebrations (independently of their unofficial actions). The official reaction to the beatification of father Maximilian was awarding him and his fellow prisoners who died in the Auschwitz camp with post-mortem Orders of Virtuti Militari, the highest military decoration in Poland, based on the resolution of the State Council on March 22nd 1972.

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