

St. Maximilian Kolbe

BORN 1894; DIED 1941
PRIEST AND MARTYR
FEAST DAY: AUGUST 14

IN THE MIDST of the worst horrors humanity inflicts on itself, God raises up saints to show that good cannot be destroyed. St. Maximilian Kolbe, martyred in a Nazi death camp partway through World War II, was such a saint.

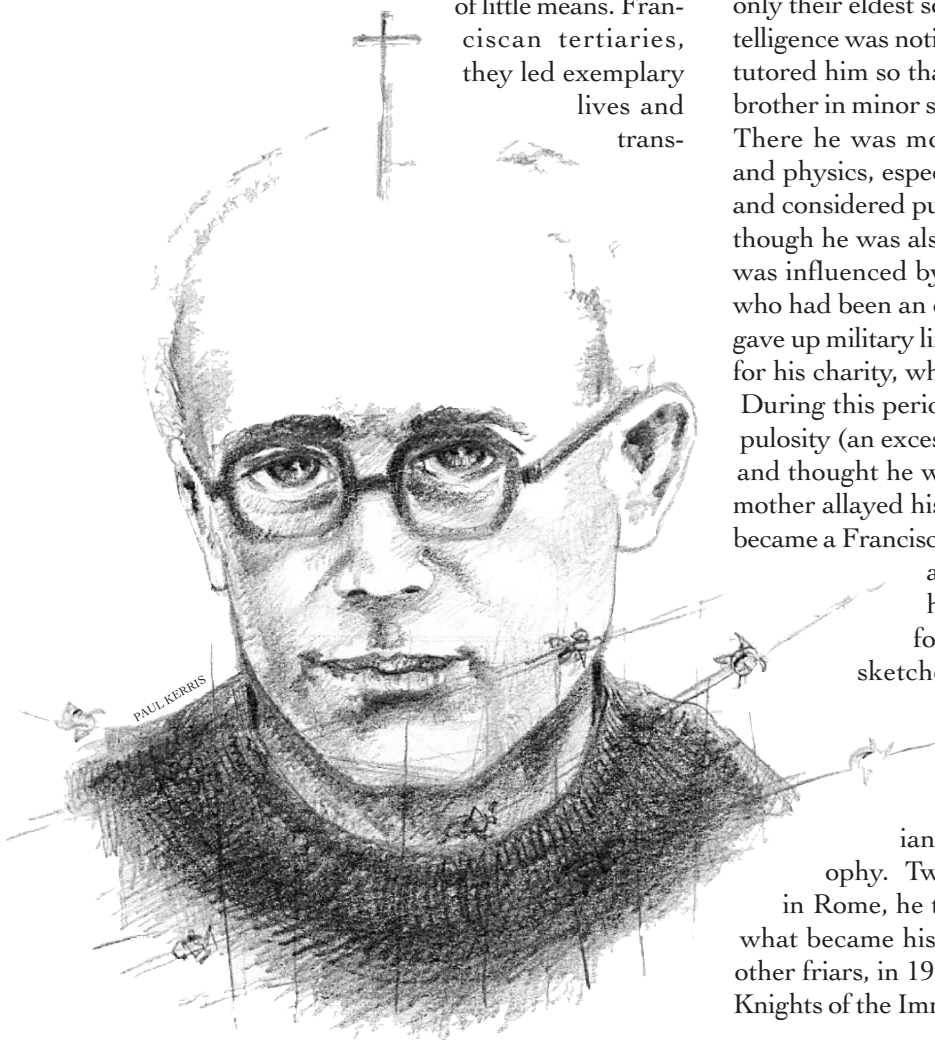
Maximilian was born at Zdunska-Wola, a village near Lodz, Poland, the second of four sons (one of whom died in infancy) of Julius Kolbe and Marianne Dabrowska. They were weavers of little means. Franciscan tertiaries, they led exemplary lives and trans-

mitted a deep faith to each of their sons. Maximilian learned to pray at a very young age and was an obedient child, yet he was full of mischief and sometimes wild, a worry to his mother. One day when he was about twelve, after his mother had expressed especially great anxiety, he prayed before a statue of the Blessed Mother, asking what would become of him. He saw a vision of her in which she held two crowns, a white one for purity and a red one for martyrdom. She asked him whether he would accept either, and he replied that he would accept both.

Maximilian's parents could afford to educate only their eldest son. However, Maximilian's intelligence was noticed by a local pharmacist, who tutored him so that he was able to join his older brother in minor seminary when he was thirteen. There he was most interested in mathematics and physics, especially astronomy and rocketry, and considered pursuing a career in science. Although he was also interested in the military, he was influenced by the example of a Franciscan who had been an officer in the Polish army, then gave up military life to become a priest renowned for his charity, whose shrine was near his home.

During this period, he also suffered from scrupulosity (an excessive anxiety about sinfulness), and thought he was unfit for religious life. His mother allayed his anxiety and, at seventeen, he became a Franciscan. Despite poor health (probably tuberculosis), at eighteen he was sent to Rome to study for the priesthood. (Some of his sketches of spacecraft designs were filed with a patent office while he was at seminary in Rome.)

At twenty-one, Maximilian earned a doctorate in philosophy. Two years later, still at seminary in Rome, he took the first definitive step in what became his lifelong apostolate. With six other friars, in 1917 he organized a sodality, the Knights of the Immaculata (that is, of the Blessed



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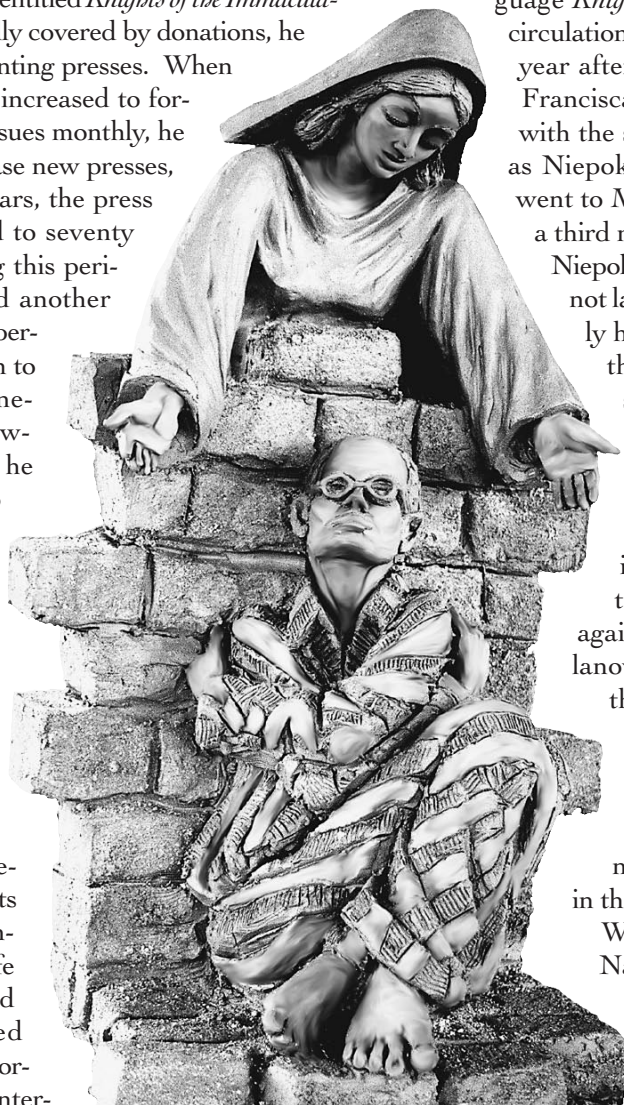
Mother), with a mission to pray for sinners and to combat hostility to the Catholic faith, which he had especially noted in Masonic-inspired demonstrations against Catholicism. The Knights' badge was the Miraculous Medal that had been made known through St. Catherine Labouré in 1832. He was ordained a priest in the following year, and went to Kracow, Poland in 1919 to teach Church history in a seminary. This assignment did not last long, as his chronic tuberculosis became acute and he came close to dying. He was confined to a sanitarium for twenty months. In 1922 he was awarded a doctorate in theology.

In the same year, 1922, Maximilian took the next step in his apostolate, founding a magazine of apologetics that he entitled *Knights of the Immaculata*. The costs initially covered by donations, he began with old printing presses. When the press run had increased to forty-five thousand issues monthly, he was able to purchase new presses, and within five years, the press run had increased to seventy thousand. During this period he experienced another bout with acute tuberculosis, forcing him to take leave for nineteen months. However, shortly after he was again able to work, his ceaseless energy resulting in the establishment of a new Franciscan monastery, called Niepokalanow ("City of the Immaculata"), on donated land near Warsaw. Begun with two priests and eighteen brothers, the monastic life of holy poverty and prayer supported what became an enormous publishing enter-

prise. *The Knight of the Immaculata's* press run rose to seven hundred fifty thousand monthly, a newspaper *The Little Daily* achieved a peak circulation of two hundred twenty-five thousand on Sundays, and several other periodicals were published, along with a multitude of tracts on catechetical and devotional subjects. Niepokalanow quickly became a large self-contained community with a seminary, novitiate, hospital, electrical plant, fire department, and airport. The Knights of Immaculata quickly grew and Maximilian traveled to chapter groups all over Europe.

In 1930, Maximilian and four other friars moved to Japan. Within a month of his arrival, he published the first issue of a Japanese-language *Knight*. By 1936, it achieved a circulation of sixty-five thousand. The year after his arrival, he founded a Franciscan community at Nagasaki with the same publishing apostolate as Niepokalanow. (In mid-1932 he went to Malabar, India and founded a third monastery along the lines of Niepokalanow, which however did not last.) Almost single-handedly he had built up an empire of the printed word, all in the service of God through the Immaculata, the Blessed Mother. In 1936, Maximilian returned to Poland in poor health, hemorrhaging blood as a result of his tuberculosis. His health again improved, and Niepokalanow began a radio station at the end of 1938, with future hopes for a movie studio as well. By this time, there were over seven hundred sixty monks at Niepokalanow, the largest monastery in the world.


World War II began with Nazi Germany's invasion of Poland. Maximilian sent all but five priests and fifty brothers away. Shortly after the inva-



Martyr of Charity, by Timothy Schmalz



“He told everyone that the way to glory was through the cross.”



sion began, the German army pillaged and looted Niepokalanow. The friars were briefly interned and then allowed to return, and eventually three hundred of those who had been sent away returned. The monastery became a hospital and a refuge for between two and three thousand Poles, of whom two-thirds were Jewish. The friars shared everything they had with these refugees, and at the same time continued to publish *Knight* for some months, with articles critical of Nazi Germany. In early 1941, The Nazis shut everything down and Maximilian and four other priests were thrown into prison in Warsaw. Again ill, he was confined to the prison infirmary. In late May 1941, the five priests were loaded into train cars with three hundred other prisoners and sent to the concentration camp of Auschwitz.

For those not immediately gassed, life in Auschwitz was nearly unbearable. Daily food consisted of a cup of imitation coffee in the morning, and thin soup and half a loaf of bread when the work of the day was done. Prisoners were subjected to beatings and torture. Priests and other religious leaders were often singled out for the worst work. Maximilian hauled wheelbarrows full of gravel for construction of a crematorium, and carried corpses to crematoriums. He was beaten often and dogs were set upon him, but he never cried out, instead praying for the guards who beat him. He was once ordered to run with a heavy load of planks on his back and, when he fell, he was kicked in the face and stomach, given fifty lashes, and left for dead in the mud. Smuggled into the camp infirmary, he recovered, hearing confessions the entire time. When anyone could smuggle in bread and wine, he celebrated Mass. He rarely rested at night, hearing confessions and praying with anyone in need. He showed compassion to those who suffered even more than he did, sharing his meager rations and sometimes not getting any, since he did not fight for food. He told everyone that the way to glory was through the cross. Another flare-up of tuberculosis put him back in the infirmary, where he ensured that everyone got medical treatment before he did and heard confessions from his bed. He pleaded with his fellow prisoners to forgive their persecutors and to overcome evil with good.

When he was discharged from the infirmary, Maximilian was assigned to farm labor. One night, a prisoner was discovered missing at roll call. The guards kept all the men in his group standing all the next day in the hot late-July sun, with no food or water. At the end of the day, when the escapee had not been found (he was later discovered drowned in a camp latrine), ten men were selected to be starved to death in place of the escapee. One of the men, Franciszek Gajowniczek, a sergeant in the Polish resistance, broke down in anguished weeping at the probable fate of his wife and children. Maximilian stepped forward and waited to be recognized, which the commandant in charge of the group did with a sneer. He then identified himself as a Catholic priest, and told the camp commandant that he wished to die in place of Gajowniczek, since he was “old” (and presumably useless as a worker) while the sergeant had a wife and children. Surprisingly, the commandant agreed, and the entire camp soon learned of what had occurred, the only time such an incident took place at Auschwitz.

Maximilian and the other nine men were stripped naked and put in a bunker. For fourteen days, the prisoners slowly died of thirst and starvation. Their thirst led them to lick moisture off the walls and to drink their own urine. During those days of agony, instead of the expected screaming and weeping, the guards who came to remove the dead heard Maximilian encouraging the others, singing hymns, leading the prisoners in prayer such as the psalms and the rosary, and offering meditations on the Passion of Jesus. At inspections, he was usually found kneeling or standing in the center, cheerfully smiling, even when the others could no longer rise. Toward the end, he whispered prayers that he no longer had the energy to speak aloud. Finally the bunker was needed for a new batch of prisoners. Four men were still alive, Maximilian alone fully conscious and completely composed. They were executed by lethal injections of carbolic acid. The bright light of this holy son of Mary, the founding Knight of the Immaculata, shone forth even more brilliantly in his martyrdom. The Militia of the Immaculata today counts nearly four million consecrated lay members in forty-six nations.

