

**“Maximilian Kolbe: a Living Stone”**  
by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)  
*Second in a series about Modern Martyrs*

1<sup>st</sup> Peter 2:4-10

July 14, 2019

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Please read the Scripture by clicking [here](#).

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The “patron saint of our difficult age.” That’s what Pope John Paul II called him. The Pope was standing at the execution cell where prisoner #16670 had made his witness to Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup>

This summer, we’re hearing stories of modern martyrs. They are witnesses to the Good News of Jesus. Through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, hundreds upon hundreds of thousands were martyred. In many instances, they were targets simple for being Christian. Others were murdered for converting to Christianity. Others were killed because their following of Jesus was considered subversive.

Why do we remember martyrs? Forgetting them would give a victory to those who killed them. Justice demands we remember. Because they died in Christ Jesus, the final victory is theirs!

We also remember for ourselves. Martyrs teach us who we are, Jesus’ people. We are the church, and the church is made of living stones.

II

We hear that phrase “living stones” in today’s reading.

It starts with Jesus, the “living stone.” We look at him. He is nothing! He is damaged: chipped, cracked, broken. We toss him aside. You don’t build a structure with such stones.

Except God sees differently, and God sees truly. God knows Jesus is chosen and precious. He is the most important stone. On him God builds a New Temple, the community of God’s people. Jesus, to us offensive, rejected, crucified. Jesus, by God resurrected, accepted, beautiful.

We are living stones too. God is making the community of God’s people out of the likes of us, and the faithful before us, and our siblings in Christ around the world. You are living stones: chipped, cracked, broken. The very best stones among us . . . like Jesus, they are offensive, rejected, martyred.

Westminster Abbey in London has stone statues of 10 martyrs from the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Rev. Susan and I picked eight of them to tell their stories this summer.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://saintmaximiliankolbe.com/biography>

### III

Today, we hear the witness of prisoner #16670, Maximilian Kolbe.

Kolbe was from a modest and devout Polish Catholic family.<sup>2</sup> As a youth he was very spiritual. He moved to a Franciscan monastery at age 13, began preparations to be a monk at 16, completed his vows at 20, and became a priest at 24.

His given name was Raymond. As a monk he took two new names: Maximilian and Mary. He was fiercely devoted to the Virgin Mary, mother of our Lord Jesus. He told of this childhood experience:

*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.<sup>3</sup>*

Maximilian was smart, industrious and innovative. He had doctoral degrees in both philosophy and theology. He began seminaries and monasteries in Poland, Japan and India. He was a publisher, a radio broadcaster and ham radio operator.

When Germany and the Soviet Union invaded Poland in 1939, he organized a hospital. He marshalled his monk-brothers to shelter refugees.

### IV

These refugees included 2,000 Jews, whom he hid from the Nazis.

Frankly, Father Kolbe's record regarding Jews was mixed. His actions and some of his words showed a strong compassion for Jews. He took risks to save many. That's important!

Yet, some of the things he published — while he probably did not write them himself, he did publish them — were antisemitic. They reflected the vile antisemitism that was commonplace in those times.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> I consulted these sources about Kolbe's life: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maximilian\\_Kolbe](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maximilian_Kolbe); <https://www.westminster-abbey.org/abbey-commemorations/commemorations/st-maximilian-kolbe>; <http://www.auschwitz.dk/kolbe.htm>; <https://saintmaximiliankolbe.com/biography/>

<sup>3</sup> Armstrong, Regis J. and Ingrid J. Peterson, *The Franciscan Tradition* (Collegeville, MN:Liturgical Press, 2010), 50. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maximilian\\_Kolbe](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maximilian_Kolbe)

<sup>4</sup> See the helpful exchange between historians in *The New York Review of Books*, (April 14, 1983). [www.nybooks.com/articles/1983/04/14/kolbe-anti-semitism-2](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1983/04/14/kolbe-anti-semitism-2). It is notable that because of Koble's mixed record, he is not honoured as one of the "Righteous Among the Nations" at the Yad Vashem holocaust memorial in Jerusalem.

This gets at something important about how we remember martyrs, or any hero. They are no more than human. They held beliefs that were wrong, and some things they did were wrong, because they were like us.

We need to use our discernment.

*God, what do you want us to remember about this person? What do we need to honour? What do we need to emulate? And, what do we need to criticize?*

For we seek the same faithfulness to Jesus they sought.

#### V

The Gestapo arrested Maximilian. They sent him to the Auschwitz concentration camp. At that time it was for Polish political prisoners; it had not yet become a factory to exterminate Jews.<sup>5</sup>

The rations were starvation-level.

But when food was brought, witnesses said Maximilian stood back to let others eat first. Any he did get, he often shared.

The guards beat him.

At night, he'd move from bunk to bunk. *"I'm a Catholic priest. Can I do anything for you?"* He prayed with them. He heard confessions. He celebrated the Eucharist. He urged them to forgive their tormentors, overcoming evil with good.

#### VI

A prisoner went missing.<sup>6</sup> In retribution, others were selected. They would be shut in an underground cell and starved to death. The commandant selected ten men.

One cried out in agony for his family.

Maximilian stepped forward. *"I am a Catholic priest from Poland; I would like to take his place, because he has a wife and children."*

Remarkably, the commandant permitted the exchange.

A prisoner assigned to work in the punishment bunker said this:

*. . . From the underground cell . . . there continually arose the echo of prayers and canticles. . . . Since they had grown very weak, prayers were now only whispered. At*

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<sup>5</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Auschwitz\\_concentration\\_camp](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Auschwitz_concentration_camp)

<sup>6</sup> Some accounts say his body was found later in a latrine. He had not escaped.

*every inspection, when almost all the others were now lying on the floor, Father Kolbe was seen kneeling or standing in the centre as he looked cheerfully in the face of the SS men. . . . Father Kolbe never asked for anything and did not complain, rather he encouraged the others. . . .*

Two weeks passed. No food. No water. Most were dead.<sup>7</sup> Kolbe still lived. Impatient, the guards went in and finished him off with an injection of poison.

## VII

A prisoner later said: *“In the midst of a brutalization of thought, feeling and words such as had never before been known, man indeed became a ravening wolf in his relations with other men. And into this state of affairs came the heroic self-sacrifice of Father Kolbe.”*

The man Kolbe replaced? Franciszek Gajowniczek. He survived more than 5 years in the camps. He died in 1995, at age 95. Every year on August 14, he went back to Auschwitz.

*“For a long time I felt remorse when I thought of Maximilian,”* he said. *“But now, on reflection, I understood that a man like him could not have done otherwise. Perhaps he thought that as a priest his place was beside the condemned men to help them keep hope. In fact he was with them to the last.”*

*“He was with them to the last.”* Kolbe teaches us where the church is. Jesus’ people are where people are suffering. Not simply alongside them, or even helping them, but suffering with them. Because that is where Jesus is. He is calling you and me to be with him there.

Where is he calling you?

Cathedrals and church buildings are crafted with the finest materials: carefully dressed stones and bricks, beautiful windows that tell stories with light, crafted wood moulded with beauty.

But to see the church, behold the living stones.

Jesus is building his church with living stones that are dressed in prisoners’ uniforms; living stones that are shrunken with hunger as they share what little they have with others; living stones that are chipped with whips and broken with beatings; living stones that choose the death cell to be among the dying.

See the living stones.

And give praise to God.

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<sup>7</sup> Of the accounts I read, some say only Kolbe remained. Others say he was one of four still living.