



NEW SCANDINAVIA LUTHERAN CHURCH AUGUST NEWSLETTER 2025

People of God,

As I looked for people strong in faith for this month's article, I was surprised to read, in my book "All Saints: Daily reflections on Saints, Prophets, and witnesses for our time", August held a lot of stories of people of faith dying at young ages. But this month's story caught my eye as a story of putting others before one's self. How far are you willing to go for your neighbor?

Maximilian Kolbe was born in Poland in 1894. He was a sickly youth, prone to debilitating bouts of tuberculosis that regularly sent him to the hospital. At the age of sixteen he joined the Franciscans. After his ordination in the Catholic Church, he formed an evangelizing movement called the Knights of Mary Immaculate, and began a similar foundation in Japan, the Garden of the Immaculate.

Kolbe was back in Poland when the Nazis invaded, was arrested in February 1941, and by May was on his way to Auschwitz, the notorious Nazi concentration camp in Poland. Ragged and hungry, suffering again from tubercular attacks, subject to beatings and other abuse, Kolbe survived for three months of hard labor. All this time he remained a beacon of faith to his fellow prisoners, encouraging them to pray and counseling them against despair.

On July 30, 1941, a prisoner escaped from Auschwitz. In retaliation the commandant of the camp lined up the inmates of cell block 14 and ordered that ten of them be selected for punishment. They would be consigned to an underground bunker and starved to death. Ten men were selected. One of them, Francis Gajowniczek, cried out in tears, "My poor wife and children! I will never see them again." At this point another prisoner stepped forward and volunteered to take his place. The commandant asked who he was. He replied, "I am a Catholic priest." The commandant accepted his offer, and so Father Maximilian Kolbe assumed his place among the condemned.

His final passion began when he entered the death bunker in July of 1941. There was nothing for the inmates to consume but their own urine. Kolbe passed the days leading his companions in prayer, preparing them for death, and keeping vigil with them as they gradually succumbed. By August 14 Kolbe and three others were still alive, at which point the Nazis grew tired of waiting any longer. The four were killed by injections of carbolic acid; their bodies were cremated in the camp ovens.

In 1982 Pope John Paul II who, as bishop of Cracow, had often prayed at the scene of Kolbe's death, presided over his canonization in Rome. Present for the ceremony was Francis Gajowniczek, the man in whose place Kolbe had died. The pope called Kolbe a true martyr and saint for our times whose heroic charity proved victorious over the architects of death. He cited the words from the Gospel of John: "Greater love hath no man than this: to lay down his life for his friends."

This has given me lots to think about. How about you?

Pastor Sara