

Day 8 - Who are you, St. Maximilian Kolbe?

“Who are you, St. Maximilian Kolbe?”

If we were to ask the saint this question in an interview, we might be disappointed, at least initially. With gentleness and humility, he would probably reply: “Now that question is not so important. What’s really important is this one: ‘Who are you, O Immaculate Conception?’” This answer shouldn’t disappoint us if our goal in the interview were to get to know St. Maximilian, for his answer actually tells us a lot about him. In fact, one great passion of his life was to come to know the mystery of Mary, particularly as she revealed herself to St. Bernadette of Lourdes, “I am the Immaculate Conception.” Why did she call herself “The Immaculate Conception?” Isn’t her name Mary? Tomorrow, we’ll begin to reflect on this intriguing mystery. Today, let’s see what, in our hypothetical interview, Kolbe wouldn’t have answered.

Who is St. Maximilian Kolbe? He’s known by many titles: Martyr of Charity, The Saint of Auschwitz, Founder of the Militia Immaculata, Apostle of Mary, and Patron Saint of the 20th Century. But before all this, he was just Raymond, Raymond Kolbe, who in 1894 was born into a poor, Polish farming family. And from the beginning, one wouldn’t have guessed he’d eventually be a great saint. In fact, one day, his mother was so frustrated with his behavior that she yelled at him in exasperation: “Raymond, what will become of you?!” This shook the boy to the core. Filled with grief, he immediately turned to the Mother of God, asking her, “What will become of me?” Then he went to a church and repeated his question. The future saint recounted what happened next:

Then the Virgin Mother appeared to me holding in her hands two crowns, one white and one red. She looked at me with love and she asked me if I would like to have them. The white meant that I would remain pure and red that I would be a martyr.

I answered yes, I wanted them. Then the Virgin looked at me tenderly and disappeared.²⁸

The white crown of purity came first. Raymond confirmed himself in it when, as Brother Maximilian, he professed religious vows, one of which was chastity. But his purity was not just of the body. For there’s another kind of purity: purity of intention. A person practices purity of intention when he directs his thoughts, words, and actions not to himself or another creature but to a divine purpose or mission, and ultimately to God.

Perhaps because of his natural intensity and passion, Kolbe felt a particularly strong desire to give himself to a specific mission or goal. One of his classmates in the minor seminary relates, “He often said that he desired to consecrate his entire life to a great idea.”²⁹ Kolbe’s “great idea” eventually crystallized into what he called the “Militia Immaculata,” which he started in 1917 with six of his fellow seminarians. The “M.I.,” as they called it, truly was a “great idea,” at least in the sense of its ambition. Its goal was nothing less than to bring the whole world to God through Christ under the generalship of Mary Immaculate, and to do so as quickly as possible. Fulfilling this mission through obedience to God’s will, in union with Mary Immaculate, was Kolbe’s entire concern — his pure intention — and he sacrificed everything for its accomplishment, which brings us to the red crown.

In 1941, after decades of incredibly fruitful apostolic labors in Poland and Japan, Kolbe was arrested by the Gestapo and sent to the Auschwitz concentration camp. Before his arrest, his brother Franciscans had pleaded with him to go into hiding. He said he was grateful for their loving hearts but couldn't follow their advice. Later, he explained why, "I have a mission — the Immaculata has a mission to fulfill."³⁰ That mission was accomplished on the eve of the feast of Mary's Assumption into heaven, when, after having volunteered to take the place of a prisoner condemned to starvation, the impatient Nazis finished Kolbe off with a lethal injection. Thus, St. Maximilian died a martyr of charity and received his second crown from his Immaculata.

Today's Prayer:

Come, Holy Spirit, living in Mary. Make me pure in body and spirit and help me to die to myself.