

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Maximilian Kolbe

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: August 14

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IN BRIEF

Saint Maximilian Kolbe

Polish Franciscan priest, apostle of the Immaculata, who died at Auschwitz giving his life for a husband and father.

Feast day	August 14
Born	January 8, 1894, Zduńska Wola, Poland
Died	August 14, 1941, Auschwitz concentration camp (occupied Poland)
Canonized	October 10, 1982, by Pope John Paul II
Era	20th century
Patron saint of	prisoners, journalists, amateur radio operators, families, people struggling with addiction

In this booklet

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Niepokalanów, the City of the Immaculata Founded by Saint Maximilian Kolbe

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Maximilian Kolbe

Saint Maximilian Kolbe was a Polish Franciscan priest who died at Auschwitz on August 14, 1941, after offering his life in place of a husband and father condemned to death by starvation. A tireless apostle of the Virgin Mary, founder of the Militia of the Immaculata and of the great friary of Niepokalanów, he was also a pioneer of the Catholic press and a missionary in Japan. His feast day is August 14.

Who was Saint Maximilian Kolbe?

Raymund Kolbe was born on January 8, 1894, at Zduńska Wola, in the part of Poland then ruled by the Russian Empire. His parents, Julius and Marianna, were humble weavers with a deep faith. As a child Raymund was lively and mischievous. At about ten or twelve years old, after a scolding from his mother, he asked the Virgin Mary what would become of him. He later told how she appeared to him holding two crowns, one white for purity and one red for martyrdom, and how he accepted them both. This memory shaped his whole life.

Key dates in the life of Saint Maximilian Kolbe

- **January 8, 1894**: Born at Zduńska Wola.
- **1907**: Enters the minor seminary of the Conventual Franciscans in Lwów.
- **1910**: Begins his novitiate and receives the name Maximilian.
- **1912**: Leaves for Rome to study philosophy and theology.
- **October 16, 1917**: Founds the Militia of the Immaculata in Rome with six fellow friars.
- **April 28, 1918**: Ordained a priest in Rome.

- **1922**: Launches the magazine *Knight of the Immaculata* (*Rycerz Niepokalanej*).
- **1927**: Founds Niepokalanów, near Warsaw.
- **1930-1936**: Mission to Japan and foundation of a friary in Nagasaki.
- **February 17, 1941**: Arrested by the Gestapo.
- **May 28, 1941**: Deported to Auschwitz, as prisoner number 16670.
- **Late July 1941**: Takes the place of Franciszek Gajowniczek, condemned to the starvation bunker.
- **August 14, 1941**: Killed by an injection of phenol.
- **October 17, 1971**: Beatified by Saint Paul VI.
- **October 10, 1982**: Canonized as a martyr by Saint John Paul II.

Knight of the Immaculata

In Rome, the young friar Maximilian earned two doctorates, in philosophy and in theology. He was struck by the open hostility of some anticlerical groups toward the Church, who demonstrated even beneath the windows of the Vatican. On October 16, 1917, with six companions, he founded the Militia of the Immaculata, an association of prayer and apostolate whose members consecrate themselves entirely to Mary in order to win the world for Christ. Their weapons were a simple prayer and the Miraculous Medal, which they handed out widely.

Back in Poland in 1919, suffering from tuberculosis that would weaken him for the rest of his life, he turned to the press. In 1922 he began publishing the *Knight of the Immaculata*, an inexpensive monthly magazine whose circulation reached several hundred thousand copies in the 1930s. He was convinced that the most modern techniques should be used to proclaim the Gospel: printing presses, a popular daily newspaper and even a radio station.

Niepokalanów and Japan

In 1927 a Polish prince gave him land about twenty-five miles west of Warsaw. There Maximilian founded Niepokalanów, the "City of the Immaculata." Within a few years its wooden huts grew into one of the largest friaries in the world, with several hundred friars who prayed, worked and ran the printing presses. Poverty there was strict, and life was organized around prayer and work.

In 1930 he left for Japan with a few friars. In Nagasaki, without knowing the language, he quickly published a Japanese edition of the *Knight* and built a friary, Mugenzai no Sono, on a slope many thought poorly chosen. In 1945 the hillside shielded the friary from the blast of the atomic bomb. Back in Poland in 1936, he again took charge of Niepokalanów.

The war and the sacrifice at Auschwitz

When Germany invaded Poland in 1939, the friars were forced to leave Niepokalanów. Maximilian was arrested a first time, then released in December. He then welcomed thousands of refugees into the friary, many of them Jews. On February 17, 1941, the Gestapo arrested him again. After Pawiak prison in Warsaw, he was deported to Auschwitz, where he was given the hardest labor while continuing to hear confessions and comfort his fellow prisoners.

At the end of July 1941, a prisoner from his block escaped. In reprisal, the deputy commandant of the camp chose ten men to die of starvation. One of them, Sergeant Franciszek Gajowniczek, cried out that he would never see his wife and children again. Maximilian stepped out of the line and asked to take his place. When the officer asked who he was, he answered: "I am a Catholic priest." The exchange was accepted. In the bunker of Block 11, he sustained the condemned men with prayer and hymns. After two weeks he was still alive;

on August 14, 1941, the eve of the Assumption, he was killed with an injection of phenol. Franciszek Gajowniczek survived the war and was present at both his beatification and his canonization.



Block 11 at Auschwitz I, where Saint Maximilian Kolbe died on August 14, 1941.

Why is Saint Maximilian Kolbe the patron saint of prisoners and journalists?

He is the patron of prisoners because he was one himself, and because he gave his life in a prison camp so that another prisoner could live. He is a patron of journalists and of amateur radio operators because he founded magazines and a daily newspaper, ran great printing presses and even started a radio station to spread the Gospel. He is also invoked for families, since he died to give a father back to his wife and children, and for people struggling with addiction.

Saint Maximilian Kolbe united two impulses that seem opposed: an entrepreneur's daring in the service of the Gospel and total surrender to Mary. His death at Auschwitz was their fulfillment: at the heart of a system built on hatred, he made an act of free and selfless love. In canonizing him, John Paul II presented him as a martyr of charity.

To pray with him, use the prayer to Saint Maximilian Kolbe, or follow the novena to Saint Maximilian Kolbe from August 5 to August 13, so that it ends on the eve of his feast.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Maximilian Kolbe in art

- **The gray or black habit of a Conventual Franciscan**, often with round glasses and a beard, as in his photographs.
- **The striped uniform of an Auschwitz prisoner**, sometimes with the number 16670.
- **Two crowns, one white and one red**, recalling his childhood vision.
- **The Miraculous Medal** or an image of the Immaculate Virgin.

Where to pray to Saint Maximilian Kolbe

- **Niepokalanów** (Poland): the friary and basilica he founded.
- **Oświęcim** (Poland): Block 11 of the Auschwitz I camp, where the cell of his death is located.
- **Harmęże** (Poland): the Saint Maximilian Franciscan Center, near Auschwitz.
- **Zduńska Wola** (Poland): his hometown, with the church where he was baptized.
- **Nagasaki** (Japan): the friary of Mugenzai no Sono, which he founded.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Maximilian Kolbe, Martyr of Charity

This page brings together two short sayings of Saint Maximilian Kolbe and an original prayer inspired by his life. The saint's writings are numerous and date from the 20th century; we quote only a few words here, as an invitation to discover them in the editions published by the Franciscans.

"I am a Catholic priest"

At the end of July 1941, at roll call in Auschwitz, Maximilian Kolbe stepped out of line to take the place of Franciszek Gajowniczek, who had been condemned to die of hunger. When the SS officer asked who he was, he answered simply, according to the testimony of survivors:

> *"I am a Catholic priest."*

These few words sum up his life: a priest is a man given, to the very end, to God and to his brothers and sisters.

A saying to meditate on

> *"Only love creates."*

This often-quoted phrase is attributed to him by Franciscan tradition. It sheds light on his sacrifice: in the face of hatred that destroys, only love brings something new to life.

Prayer to Saint Maximilian Kolbe

Saint Maximilian Kolbe, as a child you accepted the white crown of purity and the red crown of martyrdom: teach me to say yes to God without holding anything back.

You entrusted everything to Mary Immaculate and put all your strength at the service of the Gospel: give me the courage to proclaim Christ with the means of my own time.

In the heart of Auschwitz you offered your life for a husband and father: make me capable of acts of selfless love, however small, wherever indifference or harshness reign.

I entrust to you prisoners, hostages, victims of violence and hatred, separated families, people struggling with addiction and all who are tempted to despair. I also entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

Through the intercession of the Immaculate Virgin, whom you loved so much, obtain for me the faith that love is stronger than death. Amen.

This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia, free to use for personal and community prayer.

When to pray this prayer

Saint Maximilian Kolbe is celebrated on August 14, the day of his death and the eve of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary. You can also pray to him on October 16, the anniversary of the founding of the Militia of the Immaculata. Pray this prayer for someone in prison, for a family going through a crisis, for a person fighting an addiction, for journalists and all who work in the media, or

when you are asked to make a sacrifice for someone else. For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Maximilian Kolbe from August 5 to August 13.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Maximilian Kolbe

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint Maximilian Kolbe. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of his feast, begin on August 5; it ends on August 13. His feast on August 14 comes just before the Assumption of Mary, whom he loved so much.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the meditation, say the prayer of the day and then a Hail Mary. The suggested act helps carry the prayer into your day. If you wish, you can add the invocation engraved on the Miraculous Medal, which he loved to spread: "O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee."



Lighting a candle and praying with Saint Maximilian Kolbe.

Day 1: The two crowns

As a child, Raymund Kolbe saw the Virgin offer him a white crown and a red crown. He accepted both. Holiness begins with a generous yes, even when we do not yet know where it will lead us.

Prayer: Mary, help me say yes to everything God wants for me, without bargaining.

Today: Make an act of trust by placing in God's hands a plan that is close to your heart.

Day 2: A family of faith

His parents, poor weavers, handed on the faith to him through daily prayer. The home is the first school of holiness. Long before the seminary, Raymund learned at home to pray and to love the Mother of God.

Prayer: Lord, bless our families and make them places of prayer and tenderness.

Today: Pray with your family, or for your family, naming each person.

Day 3: All for Mary

Maximilian founded the Militia of the Immaculata so that everyone might consecrate themselves to Mary and, through her, to Christ. Mary keeps nothing for herself: she leads us to her Son. To give ourselves to her is not to turn away from Christ, but to take the shortest road to him.

Prayer: Immaculate Virgin, I entrust myself to you. Lead me to Jesus and make me an instrument of his peace.

Today: Wear a Miraculous Medal, or give one to someone.

Day 4: Proclaiming the Gospel with the tools of the day

Magazines, printing presses, radio: Maximilian used every modern technique to proclaim the Gospel. The means change; the message remains. For him, technology was never an end in itself, but a way to reach as many people as possible with the love of God.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you journalists and all who work in the media. May they serve the truth.

Today: Share a message of peace or a line from the Gospel online.

Day 5: Joyful poverty

At Niepokalanów, the friars lived in great poverty, but with joy. What is given to God is never lost. Having little left them free to give everything to their mission.

Prayer: Lord, free me from attachment to possessions, and give me the joy of a simple heart that trusts you for everything it needs.

Today: Give away something you do not really need.

Day 6: Going far away

Ill and without knowing the language, he left for Japan and founded a friary there. Weakness is no obstacle when we rely on God. His tuberculosis and his ignorance of Japanese did not stop him, because he counted on the Immaculata more than on himself. Maximilian did not wait to feel strong before he set out.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you all missionaries. Help me too to step outside my habits and go toward others.

Today: Take the first step toward someone you barely know.

Day 7: Welcoming refugees

In 1939, Niepokalanów opened its doors to thousands of refugees, Christians and Jews. Charity does not pick and choose whom it welcomes. The friars shared their food, their rooms and their prayers with strangers, at great risk to themselves. In the middle of war, the friary became a house of shelter.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you refugees and migrants. Open our hearts and our doors.

Today: Support an organization that welcomes refugees.

Day 8: Giving his life

At Auschwitz, Maximilian took the place of a husband and father. No one asked him for this sacrifice: he offered it freely, out of love. Franciszek Gajowniczek lived for decades afterward and never forgot the man who died for him.

Prayer: Jesus, you gave your life for us: teach me to give mine in everyday service.

Today: Do someone a favor that costs you, without telling anyone.

Day 9: Light in the bunker

In the starvation bunker, Maximilian prayed and sang with the condemned men. Even there, love turned a place of death into a place of prayer. No darkness is so deep that the light of Christ cannot reach it.

Prayer: Lord, at the end of this novena, I place my intention in your hands. Through the intercession of Saint Maximilian Kolbe, help me believe that love is stronger than death. Amen.

Today: Pray for prisoners and for victims of violence, and, if you can, write to or visit someone in prison through your parish or a prison ministry.

Closing prayer

Saint Maximilian Kolbe, martyr of charity, I entrust to you the intention of these nine days. You gave everything to Mary Immaculate and laid down your life for a brother: pray for me. Obtain for me a generous heart, a courageous faith and peace. Watch over prisoners, families and all who suffer, and lead us with Mary to Jesus. Amen.

PILGRIMAGE

Niepokalanów, the City of the Immaculata Founded by Saint Maximilian Kolbe

Niepokalanów, the "City of the Immaculata," is the Franciscan friary founded in 1927 by Saint Maximilian Kolbe, about twenty-five miles west of Warsaw, in the municipality of Teresin. It is the main place of pilgrimage dedicated to the saint: visitors tour the basilica, the original chapel, his cell, and a museum that traces his work.

The City of the Immaculata

In 1927, Maximilian Kolbe received from a Polish prince a plot of land beside the Warsaw-Poznań railway. With a few brothers, he put up wooden barracks and a first chapel there. Within about ten years, Niepokalanów became one of the largest friaries in the world, with several hundred religious, printing presses that spread *The Knight of the Immaculata* and a daily newspaper, and even a radio station. During the war, the friary took in thousands of refugees, before being partly emptied by the occupier.



Niepokalanów, the City of the Immaculata founded by Saint Maximilian Kolbe.

The basilica and the original chapel

The large basilica, dedicated to the Immaculate Virgin, was built after the war, between the late 1940s and the mid-1950s. It is adorned with stained glass and chapels that evoke the life of the saint and Marian devotion. Saint John Paul II visited in 1983. Next to it, the wooden chapel of the early days and the cell where Father Maximilian lived have been preserved, and let visitors take the measure of the poverty of the beginnings.

The Museum of Saint Maximilian

A museum presents the saint's personal belongings, copies of the magazines he launched, printing equipment, and mementos of the mission in Japan. It also traces the war years, the arrest of 1941, and the death at Auschwitz. It helps in understanding both the missionary enterprise and the final sacrifice.

Praying at Niepokalanów

Before your visit, you can reread the life of Saint Maximilian Kolbe. On site, a time of silence in the basilica, followed by a stop in the original chapel, lets you entrust an intention, especially for families, prisoners, or people struggling with addiction. The prayer to Saint Maximilian Kolbe can accompany this moment. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia for a personal visit.

Other places of Saint Maximilian Kolbe

- **Auschwitz** (Oświęcim): in the basement of Block 11 of the Auschwitz I camp, the cell where he died. Saint John Paul II in 1979 and Pope Francis in 2016 prayed there in silence. The visit is made through the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum.
- **Harmęże**, very near Auschwitz: the Franciscan Saint Maximilian Center, a place of prayer and remembrance.
- **Zduńska Wola**: his birthplace, with the church where he was baptized and his birth house.
- **Pabianice**: the town of his childhood, where his family settled.
- **Nagasaki** (Japan): the Mugenzai no Sono friary, spared by the 1945 atomic bomb.

Practical information

Niepokalanów is reached by train from Warsaw (Teresin-Niepokalanów station), then on foot. The friary welcomes pilgrims year-round, and August 14, the saint's feast day, draws many of the faithful. For Mass and museum times, check with the shrine before you come. For Auschwitz, a reservation through the Memorial is generally required.

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