

Homily for August 14th, 2019

Feast of St. Maximillian Kolbe

It was the summer of 1941, late July at Auschwitz. There ten prisoner were selected to die in the starvation bunker because one of the prisoners from Bunker 14 had escaped. One of those selected to die was a married man named Franciszek Gajowniczek (Gayovincheck) As he cried out: “my wife, my children”, another prisoner courageously came forward and said “I would like to offer my life for his. The deputy camp commander Karl Fritzsch derisively accepted this exchange and Father Maximillian Kolbe and nine others were placed in an underground bunker without food or water to die.

Usually it wouldn't be long before demented screams from the starving and dehydrated men would echo throughout the camp. But with these men it was different. Bruno Borgovietz – an orderly at Auschwitz - was an eyewitness to the starvation block in Bunker 11. These are his words:

From the cells of the condemned men, every day there were heard prayers in a loud voice. The Rosary and the religious hymns in which even the prisoners of the other cells joined. In the moments when the guards were absent, I descended into the subterranean cell to talk with and console my companions. The ardent hymns and prayers sounded throughout the whole subterranean area. It seemed to me that I was in Church. Fr Maximillian Kolbe started, and all the others responded. After almost two weeks four men clung to life. On August 14, the Eve of the Assumption one man was left alive, Father Kolbe. An SS guard murdered him with a lethal injection of carbolic acid.

At the Canonization Mass for Maximillian Kolbe in 1982, at which over 200,000 were present, Pope St. John Paul II said of his Polish compatriot: “Kolbe was a saint for our time”. Here was a man who embodied mercy in a place of evil incarnate. He was a man who embodied the character of the Lamb of God in a place where satanic lions devoured all who came within its electric barb wired fences.

Here was a man in who like Moses had his sight unimpaired and his vigour unabated. In a place where evil was legion, Maximillian Kolbe had the clarity of spiritual vision to sing songs of praise echoing today's psalm where we declared:

“Bless our God, O peoples, let the sound of his praise be heard”.

As a priest of the Church he bound the evil of Nazi Nationalism so that in that starvation bunker the Lord was truly present and Franciszek Gajowniczek was present with his family at Kolbe's Canonization in 1982.

His life was such a clear mirror of the life of Jesus, because St Kolbe consecrated his life daily to our Blessed Mother, and like her prayed,

I am the servant of the Lord, be it unto me according to your word.

Although we do not live in a time where we face the oppression of a death camp, we are always called by the Lord to live in this world free of those powers that would want to diminish and suppress the life of Grace. May we in this Mass recommit ourselves to live knowing that Jesus is truly with us and within us and wants to bind evil and lose his love. With such trusting faith may we raise our voices in praise each day so that our hymns and prayers can be joined with Maximilian Kolbe as we too burn with love for the Immaculate Virgin Mary have a zeal for souls and love for our neighbours.