



April, 2014

## **THE MARTYR AND THE CROSS** **Auschwitz and Calvary**

“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (Jn 15:13). These are Christ’s words pronounced on the vigil of his passion. These words were lived out the next day, sealed with the gift of life for all men. A man, a disciple of Christ, a son of Saint Francis, gave his life for another man<sup>11</sup> thus making the same gesture of love that Christ made.

It is therefore possible to draw a parallel between the passion of Christ and the sacrifice of the Franciscan martyr. We might say that Father Kolbe lived, in various stages, the experience of the passion.

### **“My soul is sorrowful”**

*“He took with him Peter, James, and John, and began to be troubled and distressed. Then he said to them, “My soul is sorrowful even to death. Remain here and keep watch” (Mk 14: 33-34).*

The evening of February 16 1941, the vigil of his arrest, Father Kolbe pauses with a group of young friars talking of the grace of martyrdom that would certainly be granted to him. Back in his room, as Christ on the vigil of the passion, Father Kolbe cannot sleep. He senses that the “hour” is coming. At two in the morning, he awakens a confrere and prays with him. At four another confrere visits him and notices the pallor of his face.

### **“Friend, do what you have come for.”**

*“Judas, one of the Twelve, arrived, accompanied by a large crowd, with swords and clubs, who had come from the chief priests and the elders of the people” (Matt. 26: 47).*

Like Jesus, Maximilian foresees his arrest: “He openly told me, relates a confrere that in mid-February the Gestapo would come for him. I noticed that he wasn’t afraid, but multiplied his efforts to spiritually prepare the entire convent for the coming of the persecution.” On February 17, 1941, three dark cars come to take Father Kolbe. Before they take him away, he turns to his friars, showing extraordinary calm and understanding, and says goodbye with an exhortation: “Don’t forget love.”

### **“They were ridiculing and beating him”**

*After arresting him, they led him away...They were ridiculing and beating him. They blindfolded him and questioned him, saying, “Prophesy! Who is it that struck you?”...They brought him before their Sanhedrin.”(Lk 22: 54-66).*

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<sup>1</sup> G.P so commented the martyrdom of S. Maximilian Kolbe on February 20 1993 in the church dedicated to the Madonna della Fiducia in Rome.

Father Kolbe, who already knew the hardships of the prison in Lamsdorf, Amititz and Ostrzeszow, is taken to Warsaw and enclosed in the Pawiak prison for the “sorting out” for the extermination camps. The Franciscan habit exposes him to maltreatment and humiliation of all kinds, nevertheless his interior peace is never shaken. He walks in the light of faith and abandonment to God’s Love.

On May 2, 1941, Father Kolbe is lead to Auschwitz. It’s the hour of Calvary. The cross grows heavier. He has to quickly carry very heavy tree trunks and when he falls, exhausted from the weight, the beatings rain down on his back. He is reduced to shreds. Once, for purely sadistic reasons, a capo has him undergo fifty lashes of the whip from the strongest executioner. Father Kolbe doesn’t move any more. Krott, believing him dead, leaves him on his own.

### **“I give my life”**

*“I am the good shepherd...I will lay down my life for the sheep...no one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own” (Jn 10: 14, 15, 18).*

At the end of July a prisoner from Father Kolbe’s block escapes. The retaliation: ten prisoners will die in his place in cell of hunger. But from the lines of the saved, in one of the prisoners, the most unexpected decision is made. He steps from the ranks, walks to the front, and indicates one of the condemned who is screaming desperately. He says with a calm and firm voice: “I want to die in place of that man who has a wife and children; I’m a Catholic priest.” The proposal is accepted. Like Christ, Father Kolbe enters into this passion by his own will, as Blessed John Paul II reminded us: “Maximilian Kolbe died; rather he didn’t die, but gave life.”

### **Behold the man!”**

*“Behold the man! I find no guilt in him” (Jn 19: 5, 6).*

Faced with the strength of the prisoner number 16670, the camp commander, Fritsch, seems to know a moment of stunned uncertainty and steps back lightly. Slowly even the prison guards, who assist in the slow agony, find themselves forced to manifest their admiration: “Here is a great man. One like him, here, we have never seen.”

### **“Father, forgive them”**

*“Forgive them, they do not know what they do” (Lk 23: 34).*

Father Kolbe looks at his executioners with love, even starvation bunker, but they can’t withstand his gaze and shout: “Don’t look at us like that!”<sup>2</sup> The hardships, the misunderstandings, the most unbearable trials did not condition his offering. They have inflamed him even more in the love of God and neighbor, convinced that “the cross is the school of love.”

**Angela Esposito**  
*For the community*

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<sup>2</sup> Bruno Borgowiec.