

Commentary on the Gospel for Wed, Aug 14th 2013

Today we celebrate the Memorial of Saint Maximilian Kolbe, Priest and Martyr. Saint Maximilian is truly a saint for the twentieth century. He was a Franciscan, a doctor of theology, an editor, a leader of a monastery that had over eight hundred men, a missionary to Japan where he established a second monastery, a preacher of the Gospel in India, and this does not even scratch the surface of his accomplishments. He was a man of prayer and deeply devoted to Jesus and the Mother of God. He loved his native Poland. The Nazis saw him as a threat and sent him to the Auschwitz concentration camp where he was treated with additional brutality because he was a priest. He volunteered to die in the place of Franciszek Gajowniczek who had a wife and children. The authorities put him and the nine others who were to die in a bunker where they were to starve to death. Like Paul and Silas at midnight, all that could be heard coming from the bunker were prayers and hymns to God. After two weeks without food and water, everyone was dead except Maximilian. Each trip to the bunker found him either standing or kneeling in the middle of the room and looking directly into the eyes of his persecutors. Impatient that he would not die, they finally gave him a shot that killed him.

The Old Testament reading records the end of the life of Moses. He was able to see the promised land from the mountaintop. He, the great leader of the people, could show them the way to the land of milk and honey but could not enter it himself. Auschwitz certainly was no mountaintop but even in that hell hole there was a saint who pointed men to God. He showed them the path from slavery to freedom. The saint had been a missionary all of his life and it did not end because of beatings and, ultimately, death.

I can easily imagine today's psalm being one of the one's that the band of ten sang together in that Auschwitz bunker. "Shout joyfully to God, all the earth." "Say to God, 'How tremendous are your deeds!'" "Bless our God, you peoples; loudly sound his praise." Most people will never understand how those men could sing these praises as they were starving to death. That's easy: it was the saint in the middle of the bunker. The psalmist proclaims, "Blessed be God who filled my soul with fire!" Maximilian was a man on fire. No wonder they had to kill him.

Never underestimate the power of a holy life. One man, one woman, who truly loves God can change the world. Whether it is a mother in the middle of her family, a worker in the midst of his colleagues, a student with her classmates, or a beaten, starving man in the center of a starvation bunker, if they are gathered together in the name of Jesus Christ, it is he who is in their midst. Why was Maximilian unstoppable? Because Jesus dwelt within him. It really was not anything else. He, like many others, could have become bitter and hateful and died with curses on his lips. Instead, today we celebrate his great faith.

In 1982 Blessed Pope John Paul II canonized Saint Maximilian as a “martyr of charity.” Franciszek Gajowniczek was in attendance.

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