

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

MARCH 29, 2009

Covenant is another word for pledge. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary it means “chattel given as security for a debt or other obligation.” Both the prophet Jeremiah and St. John, the author of today’s gospel, speak of how God lives out His covenant relationship with His people. As we try to penetrate the meaning of today’s scripture readings in human terms, let’s look to a man willing to put his life on the line for someone else.

Maximillian Kolbe was born in 1894 near Lodz, Poland. His baptismal name was Raymond. He took the name Maximillian as his religious name when he entered a Franciscan monastery. Ordained in 1918, Father Kolbe always believed that there were worse slaveries than earthly ones. He saw that many people lived in bondage not just to earthly rulers, but to the baser instincts in human nature. Knowing that selfishness, injustice and degradation were powerful forces, imprisoning the spirit of God within the soul of a human being, Maximillian zealously worked to free people from their slavery to corruption and sin. He founded a friary in Poland dedicated to Mary Immaculate. As the winds of World War II began blowing through Europe, Maximillian sought to save all who were persecuted by the Nazi regime. His friary became a shelter for three thousand Polish refugees, two thousand of whom were Jews. Friars shared all they had with the refugees, housing, feeding and clothing them.

The efforts of this band of Franciscan friars to provide sanctuary brought Maximillian to the attention of German officers, who became suspicious of the activities going on in the friary. As a result, Maximillian was imprisoned in February, 1941. During his imprisonment, he was asked repeatedly by the guards if he believed in Jesus Christ. His “yes” response was always met with a beating. On May 28, 1941 he was deported to Auschwitz concentration camp, where he was issued a stripped prisoner’s garment and banded with the identification number 16670.

Maximillian Kolbe died at Auschwitz in July, 1941. In the cause for his beatification, former inmates of the Auschwitz death camp offered the following testimony: At the end of July, 1941 sirens sounded in the camp. Three prisoners had escaped, one prisoner from Maximillian’s cell block and two prisoners from another cell block. In reprisal, the German officers randomly chose ten prisoners from these two cell blocks. These inmates were to be sent to an underground starvation cell. Maximillian Kolbe volunteered to take the place of one of the ten condemned men and an exchange was made. About two weeks later Father Maximillian Kolbe died after receiving a lethal injection at the hands of the German prison guards.

The survivors who offered testimony on behalf of Father Kolbe reported that his heroic self-sacrifice became a powerful shaft of light in the darkness of the camp.

In 1941 the saint wrote “The real conflict is the inner conflict. Beyond armies of occupation and extermination camps, there are two irreconcilable enemies in the depths of every soul: good and evil, sin and love.” Determined that love should triumph over sin and hate, Saint Maximillian Kolbe pledged his life in exchange for that of another condemned inmate. He lived the gospel message we have proclaimed today, becoming “the grain of wheat which falls to the earth and dies..., producing much fruit.” (John 12:24) We are probably not called to lay down our lives physically for another person, but we are often called to put our lives on the line for the underprivileged and marginalized. How do we respond to these invitations to covenant relationship?



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Jeremiah 31: 31-34

Hebrews 5: 7-9

John 12: 20-33