

WHO ARE YOU, IMMACULATA?

The Sinlessness of the Virgin and Human Dignity in the Thought and Life of Maximilian Kolbe

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IN 1979 LEONARD COHEN recorded a song with the evocative title 'Our Lady of Solitude'.¹ As a Jewish song-writer and poet, Cohen is not writing from within the mainstream of Roman Catholic devotion to Mary, although the theological orthodoxy of his poem suggests that he is aware of it. The piece succeeds in communicating a vivid sense of Mary as a living person, something that the formalities of traditional devotion do not necessarily convey. In this song-poem Cohen seems to be looking to Mary for contact, for intimate knowledge of who she is, and for personal help. These are things we hope to receive from a real human being, not an image on which we pile up our devotions. All of the facts that Cohen mentions about Mary are traditional, but he presents them with an artlessness that makes listeners feel almost as if they are hearing a description of Mary for the first time. The refrain of the song echoes what it means to the singer to have been touched by, and to have known, this mysterious woman. The repetition of the words 'touched' and 'knew' immediately situates the poem in the world of interpersonal connections and relationships that Cohen is so practised at expressing, and makes the woman being evoked seem real and tangible. Through embodying Mary in this way, Cohen suggests her relevance to the world with its struggles, she is reaching him in his lonely human situation. At the same time, the nature of his engagement with her remains mysterious, suggesting, rather than defining, Mary's role in the life of the believer and the Church.

¹ Leonard Cohen, 'Our Lady of Solitude', *Recent Songs* (1979), available at <http://www.leonardcohen.com/us/music/recent-songs/our-lady-solitude>.



Maximilian Kolbe

I start from this poem because its original strength reminds me of the far-reaching and unique preoccupation with Mary heroically enacted in the life of the Polish martyr Maximilian Kolbe. Unlike Cohen, Kolbe was a devout Roman Catholic and he wrote from within the traditions of the Church, rather than from outside them. But the intensity and intimacy of his devotion to Mary also presents the onlooker with a disconcerting perspective. Kolbe took love of Mary to an extreme of constancy and courage. The heroism of Kolbe's life, and particularly of his death at

Auschwitz, powerfully demonstrates the authenticity of Kolbe's relationship with Mary and the sanctifying reality of his preoccupation with her and with her privileges.

I wish here to look at the way Kolbe's devotion to the Immaculate Conception, a doctrine that for many believers is difficult and remote, points to implications of that doctrine that are relevant to the life of the believer. I wish to look at the impact of the doctrine on Kolbe's sense of personal identity and his behaviour. Kolbe died in order to prevent a criminal act, the murder of a fellow prisoner at Auschwitz. Reflection upon the implications of Kolbe's Marian devotion clearly, therefore, includes the field of justice and the rights of human beings.

Kolbe's final, mysterious self-mastery continues to move and inspire people today. He was a Franciscan friar who laid down his life for another man by taking the man's death sentence upon himself. A guard was assigning a quota of prisoners to die of thirst and starvation in retaliation for another prisoner's escape, and Kolbe offered to take the place of one of the condemned. The intellectual and spiritual resource behind this extraordinary resolution was Kolbe's tireless preoccupation

with the privilege of Mary's Immaculate Conception. One might assume that a man who could behave as Kolbe did at the end of his life knew little of the mundane anguish of self-doubt and self-suspicion. But the story of his life indicates that this was not the case. Kolbe's relationship with Mary seems to have been linked with a human need for reassurance about himself and the nature of reality.

Kolbe's Preoccupation with the Immaculata

Maximilian Kolbe's writings show that he engaged in a recognisable process of struggle and reflection and that his doctrinal concerns were intimately related to his personal aspirations. The constant theme of Kolbe's devotional life was the immaculate nature of Mary. He was troubled by the ignorance of Mary that he saw in the lives of others. He writes,

How little known is the Immaculata, both theoretically and still less in practical life! How many prejudices, misunderstandings and difficulties wander about in the minds of men!²

Kolbe regarded Mary with intense devotion in view of her exceptional privileges and his experience of her love. His preoccupation with the mystery of her person and his longing for knowledge of her appear in his hauntingly repeated question: 'Who then are you, O Immaculate Conception?'³ As Kolbe saw it, the perfection of this one human being sheds light on the human condition as a whole and upon our interactions with one another. 'Let us live by the love of the Immaculata', he writes, 'let us labour for her love and so radiate love to others'.⁴ His love for Mary taught him how to love Christ and how to show love to others. 'We must strive to love Jesus as Mary loved him, so that our love reach such perfection as to become the very love of the Immaculata.'⁵

Passages like this make it clear that Kolbe did not merely aspire to love Mary but to realise and exercise her own love. Having devoted himself to Mary, Kolbe seems to have become deeply aware of Mary's

² *Aim Higher! Spiritual and Marian Reflections of Saint Maximilian Kolbe*, translated by Dominic Wisz (Libertyville: Franciscan Marytown Press, 2007), 76.

³ Kolbe's final written reflection, 17 February 1941, available at http://www.piercedhearts.org/hearts_jesus_mary/heart_mary/max_kolbe_immaculate_conception.htm.

⁴ Kolbe, *Aim Higher!*, 71.

⁵ Kolbe, *Aim Higher!*, 58.

love for everyone. He writes, 'Her law is love, and her power is motherly love'.⁶

Mary in her Relationships

Kolbe constantly reflected on Mary as a person in relationship with others.⁷ He understood and developed himself in a relationship with her. Some of his superiors thought this devotion to be obsessional,⁸ understandably since Kolbe does appear in his writings to focus on the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception to an excessive and disproportionate degree. Kolbe does not, however, isolate the doctrine; rather he contemplates its meaning in relation to the other mysteries of salvation.

Unlike most of us, Kolbe seems to have meditated on Mary's sinlessness long enough to derive encouragement from it, and to find therein a personal resource. The implications of the doctrine fascinated Kolbe, the way that Mary is available to God and to ourselves.

The height of a creature's love returning to God is the Immaculata—a being without stain of sin, wholly beautiful, wholly belonging to God.⁹

He saw that, in her sinlessness, Mary is completely responsive to the interests of the other person. He understood that in this way, through her, we could draw closer to God. She offers us her help in our development and in our relationship with the members of the Trinity.

The more we belong to the Immaculata, the more perfectly will we understand and love Jesus, God the Father and the whole Blessed Trinity.¹⁰

Passages like this emphasize Kolbe's awareness that Mary is to be venerated in the context of her interaction with the Trinity and in the context of salvation history, not in a supposed solitary splendour. John Paul II, reflecting on Kolbe's life in the year of his canonization, said,

⁶ Kolbe, *Aim Higher!*, 5.

⁷ This is a very Franciscan stance. In his writings about Mary, Francis of Assisi frequently meditates upon the significance of Mary's relationships with the Trinity and with ourselves.

⁸ See Andre Frossard, *Forget Not Love: The Passion of Maximilian Kolbe*, translated by Cendrine Fontan (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1991), 53.

⁹ Kolbe, *Aim Higher!*, 10.

¹⁰ Kolbe, *Aim Higher!*, 30.

The mystery of Mary's holiness must be contemplated in the context of the divine economy of salvation in order to be venerated in balanced fashion and not appear as a kind of privilege which divorces her from the Church which is the Body of Christ.¹¹

Kolbe's Relationship with Mary's Sinlessness

Kolbe understood Mary's motherhood in relation to his own interior struggle.

Mary always was to us a most tender Mother and is now, and always will be, in life and in death and in eternity. Let us recall this truth to ourselves often in external difficulties, but especially in those more grievous internal ones.¹²

He saw our painful inward struggles occurring in a loving relationship with her perfection, her love casting light upon our loneliness. This was a source of invincible strength and courage. 'There is nothing a man cannot bear through the Immaculata.'¹³ Such reflections draw attention to Kolbe's awareness that the sinlessness of Mary is not a remote truth without relevance to the rest of the human race. In her holiness she is accessible to us.

Mysteriously, Mary's sinlessness became the source of Kolbe's own activity and identity:

The mystery, this hard mystery of the Immaculate Conception ... was for Kolbe a formidable source of energy. It fortified him; it ordered his thought; it liberated him.¹⁴

As the quotation implies, there is nothing instantly consoling about the dogma of Mary's Immaculate Conception, emphasizing as it does the sinful condition into which the rest of us are born. As Kolbe writes, 'We here admit that we are not as she, immaculate, but sinful'.¹⁵ It is characteristic of Kolbe's intellectual consistency and courage that this 'hard' doctrine should become the centre of his own thought and action.

¹¹ 'Homily of Pope John Paul II during the Holy Mass in the Basilica of St Mary Major' (8 December 1982), in *Kolbe: Saint of the Immaculata*, edited Francis M. Kalvelage (New Bedford: Franciscans of the Immaculate, 2001), 223.

¹² Kolbe, *Aim Higher!*, 12.

¹³ Kolbe, *Aim Higher!*, 12.

¹⁴ Frossard, *Forget Not Love*, 57.

¹⁵ Kolbe, *Aim Higher!*, 135.

One can sense through the momentum of his writings about Mary the way that her sinlessness motivated and uplifted him.¹⁶

The resonances with the life of Mary in Kolbe's final sacrifice are obvious. Mary's son was executed as a prisoner who freely laid down his life for the sake of others. Kolbe emphasizes Mary's responsible maternity: 'The most important work entrusted to humanity, that is, the bearing and upbringing of Jesus, God entrusted to the most Blessed Mother'.¹⁷ And he emphasizes her obedient suffering, her participation in the love that was the reason for her son's final sacrifice. 'Love her generously as a mother. She loves you even to the sacrifice of the Son of God.'¹⁸ From childhood, Kolbe took his responsibility to behave as the son of Mary extremely literally and seriously:

This is a mother without stain, immaculate, and therefore any reservation on the part of the child would cause her unspeakable displeasure and wrong, for it would contain the supposition that even a shadow of stain is not impossible in her. Quite the contrary, the child dedicated to her desires that she use him and wear him out; he desires to be consumed for her.¹⁹

It is clear that Kolbe identified Mary's love and her sinlessness as the standard of the response that she merits. Consequently, he interpreted his own behaviour always in relation to that standard. Any failure on his part would be a wrong to her in her immaculate nature. Far from seeing himself as isolated from Mary by her perfection, he sees himself as responsible to her in her sinlessness. In the quotation, with its not uncharacteristic passion, he suggests that any failure on his part to hand himself over to her would wrong her, seeming to doubt her immaculate nature. While not many believers would place their own behaviour under this kind of scrutiny, there is a rigorous uniformity at the root of his thought.

¹⁶ In this preoccupation with Mary's unique identity Kolbe followed the founder of his order, St Francis of Assisi. The dogma of Mary's sinlessness was not explicitly defined at the time of St Francis. Nonetheless, in the Marian antiphon to his *Office of the Passion*, reiterating a much older prayer, Francis states: 'Holy Virgin Mary, There is no one like you born in the world among women', clearly affirming Mary's uniquely privileged state. Francis' borrowed phrase encapsulates both the apartness of Mary and the fact that she is one of us, her distinction and yet her humanity. Following Francis, Kolbe understood Mary to comprise in her person a sublime distinction. Yet he constantly meditated on her as one in close proximity with himself.

¹⁷ Kolbe, *Aim Higher!*, 10.

¹⁸ Kolbe, *Aim Higher!*, 62.

¹⁹ Kolbe, *Aim Higher!*, 4–5.

The Child's Fear about His Identity

A key to the mystery of Kolbe's life seems to lie in an incident from his childhood, recollected by his mother after his death. Interestingly, since Kolbe is revered for an act of heroic certitude, the story begins with a ten-year-old child's uncertainty about himself. Maria Winowska, herself a concentration camp survivor, tells the story.

His greatest fault on record arose, characteristically, from a longing to own a little chicken. He bought an egg with his own money, and put it under a hen to hatch the chicken for him. Unfortunately, his mother took a dim view of his not having asked permission to do all this, and Raymond received a sound thrashing ... he often tried his mother's patience till he tired her into saying: 'My poor child, what will you come to, at all?' ... the reprimand caused a real crisis of soul in the boy. From that time, his mother says, 'he changed completely', and became very good and very obedient. Amazed at this sudden improvement, she began to watch the boy more closely, and she noticed how, more and more frequently, he would disappear behind the cupboard, where there was a little altar of Our Lady of Czestochowa, with an old oil-lamp burning before it every Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday. Crouched in the corner, the child would pray for a long time, and when he emerged his eyes were red from weeping. Fascinated by all this, his mother questioned him closely one day.

'Come here Raymond, what's wrong with you? Why are you crying like a girl?'

She thought he was sick ...

Weeping and trembling, he said:

'Mother when you said to me: "Raymond what will you come to, at all?" I was very hurt and I went to the Blessed Virgin and asked her what I should come to. Afterwards, in the church, I asked her again. Then the Blessed Virgin appeared to me, and she was holding two crowns, and asked me to choose which one I desired; the white meant that I would be always pure, the red that I would die a martyr's death. Then I said to her: "I choose them both!" She smiled and disappeared.'

Kolbe's mother continued:

From that day he was no longer the same. Often, his face shining, he would speak to me of martyrdom, his great dream.²⁰

²⁰ Maria Winowska, *Our Lady's Fool*, translated by Malachy Gerald Carroll (Cork: Mercier, 1955), 2-3. Kolbe's given name was Raymond.

Notwithstanding its supernatural aspect, this is a very human story about a child's susceptibility to anxiety about himself and his future, and about his inability to defend his identity against his mother's apparent doubt. His fear could also point to a fear about life itself. Kolbe seems to have experienced such fears with an unusual intensity and seriousness. There is a psychological truth about this description of a breakdown in communication between a child and his mother. The child is pained by the gulf between his need for certainty and his inability to secure it. Disturbed by his mother's apparent anxiety, he turns to Mary, finding in her another mother. He then seems to have completely embraced the identity Mary offers him, finding in her the gift of a reassurance that his own mother had not given. He receives through Mary a promise about who he is and who he will be that is affirming. The joy of receiving Mary's reassurance precedes the prophecy about his death and the joy is so great that it surpasses any dread. The received joy is accompanied by her intimation of the demands life will make upon him. But the child is not dominated or overwhelmed; it is his own choice to accept the identity that is revealed and to die as Mary has intimated.

As an adult Kolbe wrote, 'Even though I had a strong inclination to pride, the Immaculata attracted me even more'.²¹ We can see here the way that Kolbe found in Mary a source of reassurance when he experienced uncertainty about his own character, a spiritual and psychological discovery that surely derived from this childhood experience. This early encounter casts light on the passages where Kolbe speaks of his desire for the Virgin to possess and occupy his identity, and of his repeatedly voiced desire to know her. It is as if, following this early experience of anxiety, Kolbe is happy to dispossess himself of the burden of himself and entrust himself to Mary. 'We have surrendered all to the Immaculata.'²²

He goes on to say that, through this surrender, he is also surrendered to Jesus and the Father, illustrating the doctrinal completeness of his thought. The role of Mary in the childhood story prefigures the way that Kolbe as an adult found in his belief in the Immaculata a certainty that enabled him to confront the evil of the Nazi regime.

²¹ *Forget Not Love*, 48.

²² Kolbe, *Aim Higher!*, 24.

As a child he had found a way of coping with fear through his response to Mary, anchoring himself through the truth that he saw in her and that she held out to him. This deep assurance received from Mary casts light upon the appalling scenes of Kolbe's sacrifice and death.

Kolbe does not ever mention experiencing consolation directly about himself. 'The Immaculata can turn even our weaknesses to greater good. This is my only consolation.'²³ If the encouragement that Mary imparted to Kolbe as a child is to be interpreted in the light of his later writings, his consolation was linked to a confidence in the relationship that she was offering him and in her assistance. By giving him the name of martyr she had named him and owned him as a mother owns her child. The frightened child's sudden assurance, his daring ability to claim both crowns for himself, is made possible by Mary's invitation. It is clear from this story how Kolbe learnt to understand his own capacity for response in relation to her.²⁴

Nonetheless, Kolbe frequently appeared to his contemporaries to experience strains on his personal resources. He did not always display exceptional calm and strength. Those who knew him testify to the fact that he was a man of naturally nervous disposition.²⁵ 'External pressures',



Our Lady of Czestochowa

²³ Kolbe, *Aim Higher!*, 112.

²⁴ This desire to surrender his identity to Mary does not mean that Kolbe never again experienced ordinary human desires or conflict about what to do with himself. As a young man he was severely tempted to become a soldier rather than a friar, a fact that helps explain the frequently military character of his language when he speaks about his commitment to Mary. The fact that the imagery of warfare permeated his thought possibly suggests how deeply Kolbe was affected by the oppression of his country. See Frossard, *Forget Not Love*, 31–33.

²⁵ Patricia Treece, *A Man for Others: Maximilian Kolbe: The 'Saint of Auschwitz' in the Words of Those Who Knew Him* (Libertyville: Marytown Press, 1999), 133.

a brother remembered, sometimes ‘got him all agitated’.²⁶ Kolbe, who suffered from tuberculosis from a young age and who anticipated constant health problems, admitted to his companions that he was afraid to suffer and that he was comforted by the thought that Jesus in Gethsemane had known fear.²⁷

The Europe within which Kolbe searched for his insights about the nature of reality was unstable. The Kolbe family were poor and working-class, and it was only owing to a stroke of good fortune that Maximilian received an education worthy of his potential.²⁸ The family was stricken when Maximilian’s father, Julius Kolbe, fought for the liberation of Poland in World War I and was hanged by the Russians in 1914. Kolbe completed his training for the priesthood and his study in Rome at the end of the war in 1919. This was shortly after Poland achieved independence, and he returned home. But in 1939 Poland was invaded by Nazi Germany, and on 17 February 1941, at the age of 47, Maximilian was arrested by the Gestapo for his activities as the editor of a Polish periodical and for the protection he offered to refugees, many of them Jewish.

The Identity of Mary

Kolbe meditated particularly upon Mary’s relationship with her own identity, leading to a profound understanding of the dignity of her person. Reflecting on the Marian apparitions to Bernadette at Lourdes, he writes, ‘we place a special stress on the word *Immaculata*, if only for the reason that she thus named herself’.²⁹ And:

The privilege must be dear to her, since she says of herself at Lourdes, ‘I am the Immaculate Conception’. She does not say, ‘I am immaculately conceived’, but ‘the Immaculate Conception’. Hence it follows that she is immaculateness itself.³⁰

She indicates that the Immaculate Conception belongs to her in essence. This name must be dear to her, because it signifies the first grace she received in the first moment of her existence This name is ratified by her life, because she was always unspotted.³¹

²⁶ Treece, *Man for Others*, 48.

²⁷ Frossard, *Forget Not Love*, 108.

²⁸ Winowska, *Our Lady’s Fool*, 6–7.

²⁹ Kolbe, *Aim Higher!*, 50.

³⁰ Kolbe, *Aim Higher!*, 6.

³¹ Kolbe, *Aim Higher!*, 131–132.

Characteristically, Kolbe lays himself open to Mary's priorities. He makes the point that Mary is totally available to possess the name that God has chosen for her. This is the name that she chooses for herself and that she embraces. Kolbe saw invincible and liberating truth in what God had done for Mary and in her ratification of her own essence as she had received it from God. He understood her self-definition to be the truth about herself. She knows her own truth and is faithful to it.

Kolbe, searching for truth in his stricken and unstable world, was absorbed by Mary's ability to own herself and to lay claim to her own identity, given to her by God. This is something that, as Kolbe had discovered as a child, is impossible for us to have the strength or clarity to do unaided. Notably, Kolbe draws attention to the manner in which the privilege of sinlessness belongs to Mary. In her ability truthfully to lay claim to her own essence, Kolbe recognises a key to the mystery of her person. He is surely right to draw attention to the greatness of Mary's self-definition at Lourdes, to the fact that she speaks of her sinlessness, not merely as something that she possesses, but as who she is. We may happen to possess an attribute simply because it has been given to us, but this is not the way in which Mary owns her sinlessness. Her sinlessness is the self of which she takes possession. She incarnates it and ratifies it completely.

'The Immaculata did not bend away from the will of God in anything.'³² Kolbe's words imply the agony implicit in Mary's self-ownership because 'anything' can include that which we most love. In her freely owned sinlessness, Mary opposes all of the sinful brutality that human beings inflict on one another in this world. As the one who is sinless, she, by her own definition, stands in a relation of opposition to all that is sinful. This pure stance of opposition towards the sin of the world is informed by the truth of her sinless nature. Kolbe recognised the profoundly challenging and practical implications of such a stance. He understood Mary to be exposed to the sin that took her son's life and yet merciful from this perspective. She is:

The stewardess of the infinite value of the Precious Blood of Jesus that washes away sin. The Immaculata is the personification of God's mercy. Therefore she is rightly called the refuge of sinners, of all sinners³³

³² Kolbe, *Aim Higher!*, 132.

³³ Kolbe, *Aim Higher!*, 133.

Kolbe at Auschwitz

It is interesting that, in the early story about wanting to own a chick and in his desire to love as Mary loved, we can see in Kolbe an endearingly maternal way of relating to the world. The survivors who remembered him from Auschwitz affectionately recalled this maternal attitude. Sigmund Gorson recollects,

I was from a beautiful home where love was the key word. My parents were well-off and well-educated. But my three beautiful sisters, my mother—an attorney educated at the University of Paris—my father, grandparents—all perished. I am the sole survivor. To be a child from such a wonderful home and then suddenly find oneself utterly alone, as I did at age thirteen, in this hell, Auschwitz, has an effect on one others can hardly comprehend.

And this is how Kolbe found me wandering around, so to speak, looking for someone to connect with. He was like an angel to me. Like a mother hen, he took me in his arms.³⁴

Another survivor said, 'I owe a great deal to his motherly heart'.³⁵ Many survivors of the camp made similar statements.

Kolbe was like this despite the fact that, as a priest, he was mercilessly singled out for abuse by the camp guards.³⁶ His forgiving attitude even extended to the Nazis.³⁷ The extent of Kolbe's achievement can only be really understood in the context of how Auschwitz annihilated the dignity, the identity and integrity of others. In *If This Is a Man*, the camp survivor Primo Levi describes the way that people were destroyed by Auschwitz. Even people with strongly formed adult identities, who had lived meaningful and fulfilling lives, were left at the mercy of their lower instincts or were simply ruined in their ability to function in any way at all.

Imagine now a man who is deprived of everyone he loves, and at the same time of his house, his habits, his clothes, in short, of everything he possesses: he will be a hollow man, reduced to suffering and needs, forgetful of dignity and restraint, for he who loses all often easily loses himself.³⁸

³⁴ Treece, *Man for Others*, 199–200.

³⁵ Treece, *Man for Others*, 182.

³⁶ Treece, *Man for Others*, 174–182.

³⁷ Treece, *Man for Others*, 204.

³⁸ Primo Levi, *If This Is a Man and the Truce*, translated by Stuart Woolf (London: Sphere Groups, 1988 [1958]), 33.

The law of the Lager said: 'Eat your own bread, and if you can, that of your neighbour'.³⁹

Kolbe Offers Himself as Martyr

The pitiless, random selection of prisoners for execution at Auschwitz in early August 1941 could not have been more distant from the unique, highly personal and significant privileges granted to the Mother of God. Kolbe, with other prisoners, had already endured the punishment of waiting for hours standing in the hot sun. This ordeal was designed to destroy their resources as they waited to know who would be picked to starve. Survivors from the scene recalled the frantic, instinctive need to avoid the executioner's attention and to survive. 'Let him pass me, let him pass me, oh pass, pass.'⁴⁰

Kolbe was one of those who escaped selection. His martyrdom was prompted by his compassion for Franciszek Gajowniczek who, when he was selected, cried out in panic: 'Oh, my poor wife and my children! I shall never see them again!'⁴¹ On hearing this, Kolbe drew the executioner's attention back to himself and argued, according to the mentality of the guard and the 'unwritten law of Nazism'⁴² that his life had less value than that of Gajowniczek because he was older. Also, Gajowniczek had a wife and



The cell where Kolbe died

³⁹ Levi, *If This Is a Man*, 166.

⁴⁰ Treece, *Man for Others*, 221.

⁴¹ Winowska, *Our Lady's Fool*, 123.

⁴² Winowska, *Our Lady's Fool*, 125.

children. Kolbe's offer of himself was the only gesture that could possibly have had a result within the terms and language of the prison camp, but it was a tremendous risk. According to the witnesses Kolbe could easily have been condemned without saving the life of his fellow prisoner. Such a reaction was not beyond the sadistic nature of the guard.⁴³ But this frail priest pulled off a triumph of pragmatism and of sanctity.

'You will wither like tulips.'⁴⁴ These were the words that the prisoners heard as they were pushed into the starvation cell. As the punishment progressed, Bruno Borgowiec, another Polish prisoner who was forced to work on the penal block, recalled, 'One heard the recitation of prayers, the rosary, and hymns. Father Kolbe led while the others responded as a group.'⁴⁵ Despite the exceptional cruelty of death by starvation, Kolbe looked at the guards as they came into the cell to check on who had died with 'deep serenity'.⁴⁶ After surviving the deaths of most of his companions and enduring two weeks' starvation and dehydration, Kolbe was the last of the four remaining prisoners to retain consciousness. He died by lethal injection on the Eve of the Feast of the Assumption, offering his arm to the man who held the needle. After Kolbe received the lethal injection, Borgowiec recalled, he was 'still seated, with his head slightly inclined to one side and leaning on the wall, his eyes wide open and fixed as in ecstasy, his face clear and shining'.⁴⁷

Gajowniczek Accepts Kolbe's Sacrifice

Kolbe had no way of knowing whether the man he saved would live a good life—or if he would survive. The relationship between the two men was wordless; they had no time to speak to one another. But this relationship motivated Gajowniczek for the rest of his life. Just as Kolbe himself learnt to live out his response to Mary's sinlessness, Gajowniczek learnt to live out his response to Kolbe's martyrdom, accepting the life that Kolbe had offered him. Returning to the prison barracks, Gajowniczek was understandably in despair at the thought of Kolbe's death and fell into depression.⁴⁸ It took another prisoner to

⁴³ Treece, *Man for Others*, 223.

⁴⁴ Winowska, *Our Lady's Fool*, 127.

⁴⁵ Treece, *Man for Others*, 227.

⁴⁶ Winowska, *Our Lady's Fool*, 129.

⁴⁷ Winowska, *Our Lady's Fool*, 130.

⁴⁸ Diana Dewar, *Saint of Auschwitz: The Story of Maksymilian Kolbe* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1982), 119 and 136.

caution him against self-neglect. ‘Take hold of yourself! Is that priest to die for nothing?’⁴⁹ Eventually Gajowniczek learnt to respond to what had happened, placing a value on his own life as Kolbe had valued it and accepting his identity as it emerged in the light of Kolbe’s sacrifice. ‘What I do now is my mission for him and his message.’⁵⁰ He lived to attend Kolbe’s canonization and it was only then that his anguish about his inadvertent part in Kolbe’s death lifted. He said, ‘Today is the happiest day of my life’.⁵¹

Implications of Kolbe’s Martyrdom

It is not difficult to see the relevance of Kolbe’s sacrifice in our world today, where so many human beings are confined, damaged and destroyed at prisons and internment camps, where prisoners continue to be tortured and their human rights are ignored in the name of political beliefs. It is only necessary to follow the news or the work of charities such as Amnesty International and Reprieve⁵² to see that executions and torture continue to be a tragic reality.

Kolbe ratified the name that Mary offered to him as a child by giving himself up to a sacrificial death. In this manner he fulfilled the response of the child who embraced his own identity in a martyr’s crown.⁵³ Kolbe’s self-offering was a public act with immediate implications for the lives of others. At the same time as Kolbe chose to die, he offered Gajowniczek back his life and he reached out to the condemned men whose fate he had chosen to share, supporting one of them as they walked to the execution chamber.⁵⁴ He continued to give this support

⁴⁹ Kolbe: *Saint of the Immaculata*, 127.

⁵⁰ Kolbe: *Saint of the Immaculata*, 129.

⁵¹ Kolbe: *Saint of the Immaculata*, 129.

⁵² Founded in the United Kingdom in 1999 by Clive Stafford Smith to defend prisoners in the most desperate situations. See www.reprieve.org.uk.

⁵³ At Kolbe’s canonization John Paul explicitly granted Kolbe the status of martyr in resolution of a theological dispute about whether he actually qualified as one. Problematically, the issue for which Kolbe died was not a point of faith, as traditionally required, but the life of another human being. In allowing Kolbe the status of martyr, the Pope pointed to the theological implications of Kolbe’s sacrifice in laying down his life for another man. He declared, ‘Father Maximilian Kolbe, himself a prisoner of the concentration camp, defended in that place of death an innocent man’s right to life. Father Kolbe defended his right to life, declaring that he was ready to go to death in the man’s place, because he was the father of a family and his life was necessary for his dear ones. Father Maximilian Maria Kolbe thus affirmed the Creator’s exclusive right over innocent human life. He bore witness to Christ and to love.’ John Paul II, ‘Homily at the Canonization of St Maximilian Mary Kolbe’ (10 October 1982), at <http://www.theworkofgod.org/Saints/Lives/MaxKolbe.htm>.

⁵⁴ Treece, *Man for Others*, 224.

until the end. Kolbe laid down his life to spare Gajowniczek's family the kind of agony that Mary went through, and out of love for Gajowniczek and respect for his relationships.⁵⁵

Kolbe's lifelong preoccupation had been the perfection of Mary's humanity, her immaculate identity and her unconditional opposition to sin expressed through her selfless relationships. His martyrdom was inspired and sustained by the Marian devotion that had so radically informed Kolbe's thought and formation. Kolbe's profound awareness of Mary's dignity as a person appears to have informed his sensitivity to the dignity of every person. It is consistent, therefore, that Kolbe's martyrdom was in defence of the sanctity of a human life. This act, unprecedented at Auschwitz, inspired the camp and gave hope to many who had fallen into despair.⁵⁶ Kolbe's own mother received the news of her son's martyrdom in October 1941.⁵⁷

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⁵⁵ Gajowniczek was reunited with his wife, but not his two young sons who were killed by Russian shells in 1945 before their father returned. See Dewar, *Saint of Auschwitz*, 16 and 135–136.

⁵⁶ Treece, *Man for Others*, 233.

⁵⁷ Dewar, *Saint of Auschwitz*, 115.