



Fr Maximilian
Kolbe



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St Maximilian Kolbe

FEAST DAY: 14 AUGUST

WORDS • Andrew Balcerzak

No one has greater love than this, than to lay down his own life for his friends.

John 15:13

Raymond Kolbe was born into a patriotic working-class Polish family on 8 January 1894 near the city of Lodz, in Russian-occupied Poland.

Raymond's father, Julius, fought for independence and was captured by the Russians and hanged in 1914.

Raymond's life was strongly influenced by a vision he had when he was 12 years old. Raymond later described his vision: 'The Blessed Virgin Mary came to me holding two crowns. One was white and one was red. The white meant life of purity and the red the life of a martyr. She asked me which one I would accept. I accepted both of them.'

A year later Raymond and his older brother Franciszek joined the Franciscan Order in Lwow. He was accepted as a novice and took the religious name Maximilian. His younger brother Jozef joined them three years later.

Maximilian Kolbe professed his final vows in 1914, while in Rome, and adopted the additional name of Maria to show his devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Two anniversaries had an impact on him while he was living in Rome.

They were the 400th anniversary of Martin Luther's 95 theses and the 200th anniversary of the formation of the first Grand Masonic Lodge in London.

Both anniversaries allowed Kolbe to witness the deep hatred some people had for the Catholic Church and Popes St Pius X and Benedict XV. This compelled Kolbe to establish the *Militia Immaculatae* (Army of Mary Immaculate) to work for the conversion of sinners and opponents of the Catholic Church through the intercession of the Immaculate Virgin Mary.

After returning to a now free Poland in 1919, Kolbe was active in promoting the veneration of the Immaculate Virgin Mary. He founded the monastery of Niepokalanow near Warsaw and used all the modern means of communication including radio and print to continue his mission.

The monthly issues of *Rycerz Niepokalanej* (Knight of Immaculate Virgin Mary) reached a circulation of 750,000 and the special children's issue, *Rycerzyk Niepokalanej* (Little Knight of Immaculate Virgin Mary), reached a circulation of 250,000 and the *Militia Immaculatae* grew to 130,000 members.

Between 1930 and 1936, Kolbe undertook a mission to Nagasaki, Japan, where he established a monastery, a Japanese-language paper and a seminary dedicated to the Immaculate Virgin Mary. The seminary buildings survived the US atomic bombing of Nagasaki in 1945.

Poland was invaded by Nazi Germany on 1 September 1939 and two weeks later by the communist Soviet Union. The Nazis arrested Kolbe and about 40 of his colleagues on 19 September and imprisoned them in a camp at Amtlitz. They were released on 8 December, feast day of the Immaculate Virgin Mary.

Kolbe made his way to Niepokalanow where he started to assist thousands of refugees, of whom the majority were Jewish. This work continued until his arrest by the Gestapo on 17 February 1941.

Kolbe arrived at Auschwitz death camp on 25 May 1941 and was tattooed with the number 16,670.

At the end of July 1941 a prisoner from Kolbe's block escaped. As a collective punishment for the escape, the deputy camp commander selected 10 prisoners to be starved to death.

One of the selected prisoners was Franciszek Gajowniczek, who cried out for his wife and children, when chosen to die. Kolbe stepped forward and asked the Nazis to take him instead of Gajowniczek. The Nazis were surprised and furious at Kolbe's audacity but accepted his sacrifice.

Kolbe and nine other prisoners went into the death bunker. There for two weeks Kolbe prayed and gave encouragement to the nine prisoners until he was the last one alive.

Despite Kolbe's generally poor health due to tuberculosis contracted in his youth and the atrocious camp conditions, he continued to survive without any food or water. Finally, after two weeks, a Nazi went into the bunker on 14 August 1941 and injected Kolbe with phenol.

Kolbe was 47 years old when he was killed and his body was cremated at Auschwitz the next day, The Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. ☒

Andrew Balcerzak is a parishioner of St Thomas Aquinas Church in South Yarra.



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BOOK REVIEW

Stripped: Cancer, Culture and the Cloud of Unknowing

By Heather King,
Holy Hell Books,
\$25.95, PB

WORDS • Jennifer Nowell

Although this book indicates on the cover that it is a memoir, the title shows that in *Stripped* Heather King is writing about a lot more than her life. She uses her discovery that she has breast cancer as a springboard for reflections on life and its purpose, with its illness, suffering and joys.

King is a convert to Catholicism, and before her conversion had a very chaotic and unsettled life as a 'barfly', as she calls herself on her blog, drinking heavily and working erratically for many years. She is a very literary writer, in the sense that her writings are clearly influenced by what she is reading, and since she is strongly attracted to mysticism, this tends to come out in her book.



She is also deeply introspective, and her diagnosis with cancer sets off a series of musings on her past life, as well as her present condition, including her marriage, her spiritual life and her need to write. She is honest about her sins and failings almost to the point of masochism. I say 'almost' since the process of suffering and reflecting brings her to a kind of redemption which it is hard to see as negative, but which was obviously a lengthy and harrowing experience.

As King undergoes the medical profession's way of dealing with cancer sufferers, she offers a witty and scathing indictment on the whole process and the negligent way patients are kept waiting for test results, only partly informed as to their options, and

pushed into risky treatment decisions. Her discoveries about the uselessness of many of the medical treatments used for breast cancer are not the focus of the book, but they are shocking and enlightening at the same time.

For King, the focus of her narrative is her spiritual progress, which was forced on her as a result of her illness. Facing her own mortality makes her examine the things that are most important to her and dismiss the inessential parts of religion, which gives even mundane events a new poignancy and meaning. It also seems to set free a stream of creativeness, giving her writing a beauty that makes you want to learn passages of her book off by heart.

Coming to the understanding that love of God is the most important thing, even more important than health or life itself, is a traumatic journey for King, but it makes compelling spiritual reading. It is hard to imagine a work more deeply personal yet as unsentimental, as she ruthlessly makes startling decisions, such as refusing radiation and chemotherapy after her surgery, and realising that her vocation to write must take precedence over staying with her husband. This is an unsettling but energising and refreshing book that remains with you long after you have finished reading. ☒



WHERE'S
KAIROS?

Where's Kairos?

Marie Hélène
Chong took
this picture of a

seminarian at St Anne's Monastery,
Jerusalem, Israel outside St Anne's
Church, in May this year. ☒

Round three of *Where's Kairos?* has closed. The winner will be announced in the next issue. To enter Round four, submit your photo by Friday 31 October 2014.

To be considered for publication in *Kairos*, digital photos need to be at least 300KB and accompanied by a caption detailing who is in the photo and where they are, the photographer's name, contact email, phone number and postal address.

Email to Kairos@cam.org.au or post to Kairos at PO Box 146, East Melbourne 8002.



PICTURE BY MARIE HÉLÈNE CHONG