

Leading the FLOCK

BY BISHOP DANIEL E. THOMAS



A witness of self-sacrificing love

It was only when I made a pilgrimage to Poland while living and working in Rome that his life and death so deeply struck me! That was the occasion when I had the graced opportunity to visit and pray before the cell in which Polish Franciscan priest and martyr, Saint Maximilian Kolbe, died after starvation and lethal injection, having offered himself in exchange for a husband and father who had been condemned to death by the Nazis at Auschwitz. His was the ultimate witness of self-sacrificing love, fulfilling the words of Jesus: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (Jn 15:13).

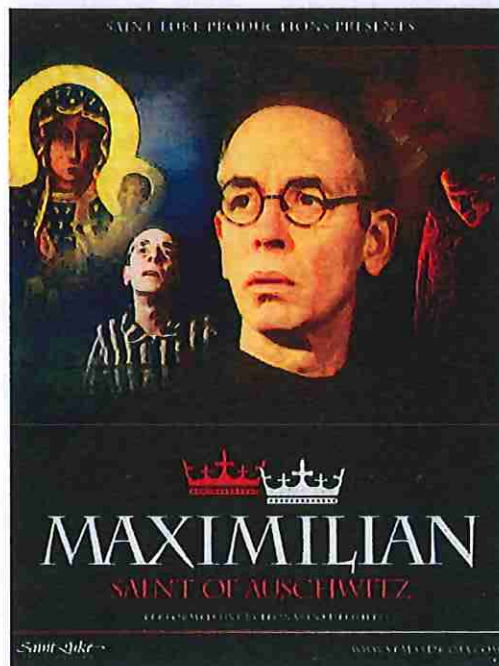
How vividly I recall kneeling in the darkness of that cell at the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and State Museum in Oswiecim in Poland, weighed down by the gravity of the atrocities against humanity that transpired there. Auschwitz, "a name that carries the burden of suffering, genocide and unimaginable cruelty, stands as a stark reminder of the darkest moments in human history" (Briscoe). The heroic self-sacrifice of that Franciscan Friar, Maximilian Kolbe, stands in stark contrast to the evil perpetrated by the Nazis and serves as a reminder that, in Christ Jesus, light triumphs over darkness,

that good triumphs over evil.

What struck me most kneeling at that cell was the massive Paschal candle placed there in 1979 by a fellow Pole, Pope St. John Paul II. How poignant that the very candle which symbolizes Easter, the Light of Christ risen from the dead, remains as a powerful symbol even in such a horrifically dark place!

In this Easter Season, with the reality of the horrors of war and violence transpiring before our

very eyes throughout our world in these days, and mindful of the recent publication of the Declaration of the Dicastery of the Doctrine of the Faith entitled "*Dignitas Infinita*" on Human Dignity, it is more than poignant that I am able to invite you to attend "*Maximilian: Saint of Auschwitz*," a powerful multimedia one-man live drama on the life of Saint Maximilian Kolbe, the Martyr of Charity (1894-1941). Saint Luke Productions will be presenting the live drama here in our diocese from Wednesday April 17th thru Monday April 22nd. You can find more information about the performances, dates, times and locations at our Diocese of Toledo website here: toledodiocese.org/maximilian. My hope is that Maximilian's witness may inspire, educate and



be a source of deep reflection for all who participate, just as Venerable Father Augustus Tolton's witness was when in 2021 Saint Luke Productions presented "Tolton: From Slave to Priest" throughout our diocese.

In *Maximilian*, audiences encounter firsthand the courageous life and self-sacrificing love of Father Maximilian Kolbe. Born and raised in Poland, the son of poor, devout Catholics, he experienced many interior trials as a young man, but the Blessed Virgin Mary sustained him by appearing to him in a vision. She offered him a crown of purity or a crown of martyrdom. He chose both! This experience instilled in him a deep and abiding love for Our Lady. Having entered the Franciscan Order in 1907, he was especially drawn to explore the Blessed Mother's role in the history of salvation. He saw her as God's agent in confounding the darkness, which was gathering in opposition to the Church. He promoted consecration to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, establishing centers dedicated to her in Poland and in Japan. Arrested by the Gestapo for his tireless work against the Nazi forces, he was sent to the infamous death camp of Auschwitz, where he stepped forward and offered his life for another prisoner, a married man who was condemned to death by starvation. Maximilian died at 47 years of age and his body was cremated along with the eight other prisoners whose lives were taken by the Nazis in retaliation for the escape of another prisoner. The man for whom Maximilian gave his life, Franciszek Gajowniczek, was present in Saint Peter's Square when the Franciscan Friar was canonized a Saint!

How providential it is that at this moment, right here in the Diocese of Toledo, we have someone with a family connection to Saint Maximilian Kolbe! Sylvania Franciscan Sister Ireneaus Samsel, OSF, shared in a recent interview that her father, Francis Samsel personally knew St. Maximilian Kolbe, who had been his superior when Samsel was a seminarian at the Conventual Monastery in Niepokalanow, Poland. Because Samsel was American, Kolbe had advised he depart Poland prior

to the German invasion. Sister Ireneaus learned firsthand from her father the profound impact Kolbe had on his community.

Actor Leonardo Defilippis, who plays Kolbe, in reflecting on the play, recently commented: "This is about what's happening today, even though it was World War II. You'll see the build up of what Hitler was trying to do and you'll see the same parallels in our situation in the world. And you'll see the different things that are going to battle and take away the freedoms of people" (Blade art). As we host *Maximilian: Saint of Auschwitz*, who cannot pause to reflect on the unjust aggression we have seen of the attacks of Russia against Ukraine, of Hamas against Israel, who cannot question the grave effects of the response of Israel against the Palestinians, and who cannot worry and wonder as we have witnessed the attack of Iran against Israel? As we unite our prayers for peace and raise our voices for the respect of every human person in the face of the atrocities of violence and war at this moment in human history, the words of Maximilian Kolbe haunt us even now: "Hatred is not a creative force; only love is a creative power."

This April, we are blessed to learn more about and be inspired by the example and witness of this Franciscan friar and modern-day martyr. His life and death should resonate deeply with all of us in these days, when the evils of hatred, violence and the effects of war in our world are ever before our eyes. It is my sincere hope and prayer that attendance at this performance will serve as a catalyst to advance our efforts to promote the dignity of every person, to encourage understanding and working for peace, to root out hatred and violence, and to promote harmony born of self-sacrificial love. Through the intercession of Saint Maximilian Kolbe, may our Catholic faith be strengthened and may we all grow in human and Christian virtue.



Most Rev. Daniel E. Thomas
Bishop of Toledo
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