

**Readings:** 1 John 3: 13 – 18; Psalm 166: 10 – 17; John 15: 12 – 16.

Raimund Kolbe was born in Russian Poland in January 1894. His parents were poor and struggled to feed their three sons. As a child Maximilian was rather self-willed, but when he was ten he told his mother that Our Lady had appeared, showed him two garlands of flowers, and asked him to choose between the white one, which meant he would live a pure life, and the red, which would mean he'd die a martyr. He had replied "I will have both".

In 1907 he and his brother Frank entered a junior seminary. He became a Franciscan novice in 1910, taking the name Maximilian. In 1914 he took his final vows, adding the name Mary, and was ordained priest. In 1917 he and seven seminarians took vows as Knights of the Queen of Heaven in the Militant Order of Mary, a sign of their devotion to Mary as "Queen of Poland", and a foretaste of Maximilian's lifelong work.

At the end of the First World War Poland regained its independence. For the next twenty years Maximilian worked, in Poland, Japan and India, to establish devotion to Mary, publishing papers, setting up communities known as "Towns of Mary", and creating a broadcasting station.

In 1939 Poland was invaded by Russia and Germany and divided between them. The original "Town of Mary" was in the German area. The Nazi authorities began a campaign against Poles especially Jews, and against any opposition based in the Church. In September Maximilian and his companions were taken into captivity, but after a few months they were released and returned to their plundered town. At the same time hundreds of homeless Poles and Jews arrived and were housed in the settlement. For a short time the community published criticisms of the occupation, but this had to stop. In May 1941, without trial, Maximilian was sent to Auschwitz. There he ministered as much as he could to his fellow friars and heard the confessions of the dying.

In July, after one prisoner had escaped, eleven others were chosen for execution by starvation. Maximilian asked if he could take the place of one of them, and the commandant agreed.

After two weeks he was found to be still alive. He was murdered by lethal injection on 14 August 1941 and his body cremated. In 1982 Maximilian was canonized as 'a martyr of charity', in the presence of the man whose life he had saved.