

PASTOR'S COLUMN

“How Can He Give Us His Flesh To Eat?”

A few days ago I returned from Poland. Among the many sights and sounds of that wondrous country, the one event that was the most moving for me was the visit to the death camp of Auschwitz and the site of the cell in which St. Maximilian Mary Kolbe was murdered by the Nazis.

One needs to be mentally prepared to visit Auschwitz or any of the concentration/death camps where millions of lives were taken. The now museum/historical site is spiritually draining and psychologically exhausting as one walks through the compound and is faced head on with “man’s inhumanity to man.”

In these death camps, millions of people were murdered, not only Jews. There were a number of “target” groups including Catholics, gypsies, homosexuals, and the intelligentsia of any or no Faith.

Maximilian Kolbe was a Catholic Priest, held two doctorates in philosophy and theology, and founded the Militia of the Immaculata whose aim was to fight evil with the witness of the good life, prayer, work and suffering. He soon found himself a target of the Nazis because he was a leader strongly witnessing to that which was diametrically opposed to what the Nazis preached.

In 1941, he was arrested and placed in Auschwitz. There he experienced terrible beatings and humiliations. One day a prisoner had escaped. The commandant announced that 10 men would die. As the 10 men were selected and were being marched away to starvation bunkers, Number 16670 dared to step from the line. “I would like to take that man’s place.” “He has a wife and children.” “Who are you?” “A priest.” No name was given, just the identity of priest. The commandant, dumbfounded, kicked Sergeant Francis Gajowniczek out of line and ordered Fr. Kolbe to go with the nine. In the ‘block of death’ they were ordered to strip naked and the slow starvation began in darkness. By the eve of the Assumption, August 14th, four were left alive. The jailer came to finish Kolbe off as he sat in the corner praying. He was given an injection of carbolic acid. They burned his body with all the others. He was beatified in 1971 and canonized in 1982.

Today, the cell in which he was murdered is a shrine. There is a plaque, a floral arrangement, and a lit Paschal Candle placed there by Pope John Paul II. The site speaks so loudly! In the midst of all the suffering and death, the lit Paschal Candle proclaims Resurrection – Light overcoming Darkness.

Maximilian Kolbe was fed with the Body and Blood of Christ. The Eucharist strengthened him to give his life at that moment in time, not knowing what effect, if any, his sacrifice would have.

Today, the one who gave his flesh and blood in Auschwitz, in the manner of Jesus, feeds the millions of people who walk through Auschwitz. His death nourishes all people, regardless of religious background, with hope – a hope and belief that good overcomes evil, that the Light continues to shine in the Darkness.

On the day that I visited his cell, I was fed with the flesh and blood of Maximilian Kolbe. I was fed with the Body and Blood of Christ through the willing death of St. Maximilian. “That meal” strengthened me in my efforts to sacrifice and witness on behalf of the Gospel and renewed me in accepting my responsibilities as an ordained priest of the Catholic Church.

In today’s Gospel, we hear the question, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” Maximilian Kolbe is one shining answer to that question for our moment and place in history.

Each of us is called to become what we eat and drink in the Eucharist. As Jesus gave Himself for us, we are called to give ourselves for others. In the manner of Jesus, we are called to feed the world with our flesh and blood and to allow light, hope, justice, forgiveness, and peace to satisfy a starving world.