News




The entrance gate to the Auschwitz Nazi death camp is seen in Oswiecim, Poland, in this Sept. 4, 2015, file photo. (CNS photo/Nancy Wiechec)



by Zita Ballinger Fletcher

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Marking the 80th anniversary of the German invasion of Poland (Sept. 1, 1939) and the beginning of World War II, the German Bishops Conference held a Mass this month at the site of the Auschwitz concentration camp honoring the legacy of St. Maximilian Kolbe.

Archbishop Ludwig Schick of Bamberg, Bavaria, celebrated the Aug. 14 Mass in a former concentration camp barracks in honor of St. Maximilian Kolbe, a Franciscan priest killed there in 1941 by lethal injection after volunteering to undergo execution in another inmate's place.

Schick, who is chairman of the liaison group of the German and Polish bishops' conferences, said he was grateful to speak at Auschwitz on behalf of Germany's Catholic Church. He recalled the German invasion of Poland, saying that the start of the war and early Nazi victories bolstered "schemes to wipe out the Jewish people as well as the Sinti and Roma — which reached tragic climax here in Auschwitz." He called attention to the suffering of the Polish people during that time.

Schick's sermon praised the legacy of Kolbe, born to a German father and a Polish mother, who was arrested and detained at Auschwitz for defying Nazi policies. Declining Nazi legal protection due to his German heritage, Kolbe stayed true to his moral convictions and chose to suffer alongside the people that Hitler's regime discriminated against as "undesirables." Kolbe made history by offering to die in place of a Polish stranger, Franciszek Gajowniczek. Like countless other inmates, Kolbe's remains were destroyed in a crematorium.

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Schick called Kolbe a "thorn in the eye of the Nazis" who "did not want to recognize Hitler as an all-powerful leader, but rather to proclaim that God is the master and ruler of all people, all races and all nations."

"I am a great devotee of Maximilian Kolbe because I am convinced that he is a patron of Europe and of all humanity," said Schick. He said that Kolbe demonstrated through his life and writings that God "gives to all people, races and nations equal dignity and equal rights. He is the good fatherly God of all."

Schick said that Kolbe's witness urges present-day believers to pursue peace.

"All wars have direct and indirect consequences," said Schick. "The direct consequences are the deaths of soldiers and civilians, destruction of cities, villages and entire regions. Thus many human relationships are shattered and many souls are wounded."



Fr. Maximilian Kolbe is pictured in an undated black-and-white file photo. (CNS file photo)

"Therefore we must pray and do everything we can so that there are no wars here in Europe or elsewhere in the world."

More than 1 million people perished in the Auschwitz concentration camp complex during World War II. The exact death toll remains unknown. The camp was the scene of some of the worst atrocities in human history. Inmates arbitrarily imprisoned by the Nazis for racial, religious or political reasons were subjected to torture, mutilation, starvation, pseudo-medical experiments, psychological abuse and dehumanizing treatment. Families were forcefully separated. Victims included women and small children. Inmates were cruelly executed in various brutal methods. After death, victims were ransacked of valuables and their remains were destroyed in crematoriums. The identities of many victims remain unknown.

Kolbe, called Prisoner 16670, was imprisoned in the camp in May 1941. The Franciscan priest was a versatile individual. Friends remembered him as a humble and methodical person with strong organizational skills and a flair for technology. He was a military enthusiast and had strongly considered pursuing a soldier's career. He was a gifted chess player, known to play against several opponents at once.

Prior to his arrest, Kolbe was a newspaper publisher and pioneered his own radio station. He founded his own religious community in Poland called Niepokalanów, dedicated to evangelization efforts. An aficionado of Japanese culture, Kolbe also pioneered another community in Nagasaki.



The Auschwitz camp photo of Franciszek Gajowniczek, the man whose life was spared when St. Maximilian Kolbe offered to be killed in his place. (Provided photo)

During his imprisonment, Kolbe was made a forced laborer and frequently subjected to beatings. Witnesses said he endured the violence with remarkable calm. After camp guards announced random executions in reprisal for a prison escape, Kolbe offered his life in exchange for that of Gajowniczek, who cried aloud when sentenced at the thought of leaving behind a widow and orphans.

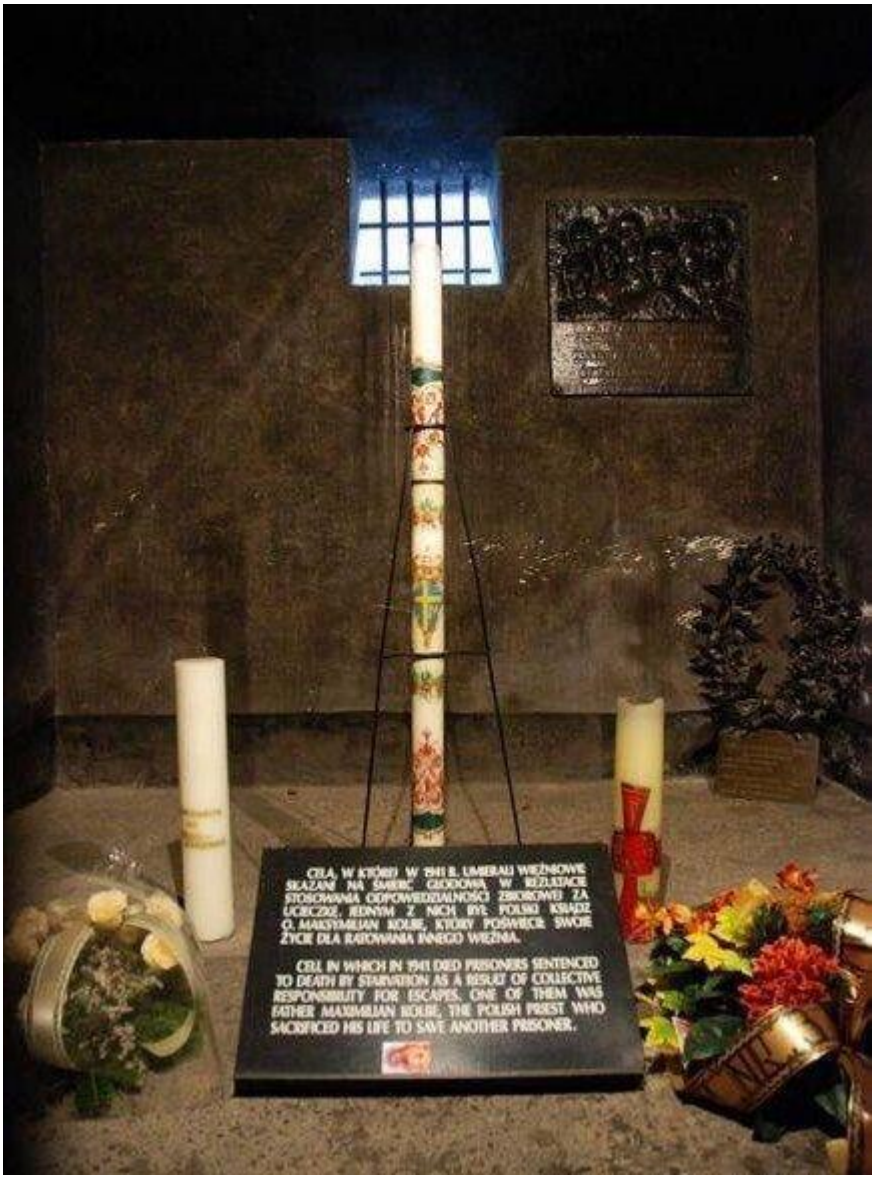
"Let me take his place. I am old. He has a wife and children," Kolbe, age 47, told the camp authorities, explaining that he was a Catholic priest and had no family.

Gajowniczek, who survived Auschwitz and lived to the age of 93, later recalled his shock at Kolbe's action. He regretted that he did not ever get the chance to speak to Kolbe or offer even a word of thanks.

"I could only thank him with my eyes," Gajowniczek said. "I was stunned and could hardly grasp what was going on. The immensity of it: I, the condemned, am to live and someone else willingly and voluntarily offers his life for me — a stranger. Is this some dream?"

Afterwards, Kolbe was locked in Cell No. 18 in the basement of Block 11 along with nine other prisoners. They were sentenced to die of starvation — a slow, painful death. Guards reported later that Kolbe encouraged his fellow sufferers to pray and created a peaceful atmosphere in the cell through his prayer and chanting. All the men died within two weeks except Kolbe. Nazi guards became impatient to "clear out" the room and executed Kolbe with carbolic acid, a highly corrosive substance that causes burns and convulsions to human beings.

Today a memorial to Kolbe with wreaths, candles and a plaque exists in the cell where he died.




A memorial stands in the cell where Kolbe died. (Provided photo)

Schick said that Kolbe's bravery and profound opposition to the Nazi system stemmed from his recognition of the sovereignty of God and the brotherhood of all peoples, which is especially relevant today.

"The acknowledgement of the only and almighty God is the most important contribution to peace and unity among peoples that we Christians can give," Schick said. "Its importance is even more heightened today, because we live in times in which God is forgotten or indeed denied."

Operations at the Auschwitz camp decreased in August 1944 after an American squadron of 127 bomber and 100 fighter planes destroyed many targets in the area,

including I.G. Farben chemical plants, a train station and an oil refinery. The bombardment lasted 28 minutes and many prisoners were subsequently evacuated to other camps. Auschwitz was liberated by Soviet troops in early 1945. The site today is preserved as a memorial to victims.

"No human being may make himself into God and no nation may lord itself over others," said Schick, "because the only God gives to all peoples equal rights and has delegated to all the same responsibilities of charity towards one's neighbors."

He stated his belief that Kolbe's spirit continues to promote world peace.

"Heavenly patrons foster goodness and protect against evil and harms," said Schick. "That is what Maximilian Kolbe does from Heaven."

[Zita Ballinger Fletcher has reported extensively on Germany's Catholic Church for Catholic News Service.]

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