

A person who has inspired me is Maximilian Kolbe, a Polish priest in the 1st half of the 20th century

I had the privilege as a student of staying for 3 days in the seminary in Krakow, southern Poland, where he had taught, but during that time we also visited Auschwitz, and Kolbe is known as the martyr of Auschwitz.

But he'd clearly been a remarkable priest before that – he had founded a Catholic newspaper, which at its height had a readership of over 1,000, 000 people in Poland – he just had a passion for disseminating Christian belief and would enthusiastically praise God whenever the readership reached new heights.

At the outbreak of the war, he was in charge of a monastery which he turned into a temporary hospital and shelter for Polish refugees. He and just a handful of others stayed and opened up the monastery to help those who were fleeing. Over a period of 3 years, they welcomed, fed and clothed about 3000 different people, many of them Jews.

Not surprisingly in 1941, the monastery was shut down by the German authorities. Kolbe was arrested and sent to Auschwitz.

At Auschwitz, whenever food was brought, everyone used to struggle to get his place just to be sure of at least a portion. Father Maximilian Kolbe however, stood aside in spite of his own hunger and failing health, and frequently there would be none left for him.

Also, strictly against prison rules, he would hear confessions and even occasionally to hold a small secret impromptu Communion service.

At night, he sometimes moved from bunk to bunk, saying: *'I am a Catholic priest. Can I do anything for you?'*

In the summer of 1941, there was an escape from Auschwitz. As a reprisal, the officers rounded up 10 other prisoners and put them in a cell to starve to death.

One of the 10 men selected just shouted out "My family! My children!" and before anyone really knew what had happened, Father Maximilian Kolbe stepped forward and said "He is young and I am older and have no wife or family. Please take me instead of him." To everyone's surprise, the guard acceded to this request. Kolbe, and the others were taken to a cell, that I have had the moving experience of seeing with my own eyes. Throughout the coming days, Kolbe led these men in prayers and in singing hymns and doing all he could to keep their spirits alive, even as their bodies were failing. He even had the infuriating habit of smiling cheerfully whenever any of the guards entered.

He died, the last of the 10, on the 14th August 1941. Shortly beforehand, one SS officer was heard to remark: this priest is really a great man. We have never seen anyone like him.

Maximilian Kolbe inspires me not just for his utter selflessness, but also because he combined that selflessness with an incredible zest for life and love for God. He seems to have been unerringly positive and knew that in any situation, however terrible, he could make a very real difference. And he did. I find his story very inspiring, but also humbling.