

Archbishop Dr Ludwig Schick

**Lecture Maximilian Kolbe Foundation, Workshop Auschwitz,  
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## **Maximilian Kolbe – Martyr of Reconciliation**

### *Introduction*

Dear participants in the “5th European Workshop on dealing with the past of Auschwitz burdened by violence” which is organized, as the four previous workshops, by the Maximilian Kolbe Foundation.

I have taken part in all five workshops and I have been invited several times to speak to the participants. It is a particular pleasure to give this lecture today on “Maximilian Kolbe – Martyr of Reconciliation”. Saint Maximilian Kolbe is the patron of the Foundation which is named after him and together with Archbishop Wiktor Skworc I have been honoured to act as the Foundation’s Chairperson of the Board of Trustees since 2007. For our Church as a whole, but especially for the Polish and German Churches, as well as for our Foundation Maximilian Kolbe is very important. Personally I admire Maximilian Kolbe very much. In 2011, seventy years after his assassination here in Auschwitz, I wrote 12 articles about Maximilian Kolbe which were published in the Conventual Franciscan magazine “Sendbote des heiligen Antonius” and I also wrote a preface for a book about him.

The importance of Maximilian Kolbe for the Foundation is emphasised in the first sentences of the preamble: “The Maximilian Kolbe Foundation takes its inspiration from St. Maximilian Kolbe, the martyr of reconciliation, who gave his life in place of a fellow inmate in the Auschwitz concentration camp. In so doing, he gave witness that hate and violence need not have the last word. It is from this act of witness that the Maximilian Kolbe Foundation finds the strength for its reconciliation work. It has a special obligation to the victims of injustice and violence.”

The Maximilian Kolbe Foundation wants to contribute to the reconciliation of people and nations having experienced a past burdened by violence. To reach this objective the Foundation has chosen St. Maximilian Kolbe as patron and as an example and calls him “Martyr of reconciliation”.

The Foundation was also named after Maximilian Kolbe, because it shall continue the reconciliation work accomplished by the Maximilian-Kolbe-Werk between Germans and Poles by caring for former concentration camp inmates, which will be completed in the foreseeable future. For this reason the Maximilian-Kolbe-Werk together with the Polish and German Bishops’ Conferences established the Maximilian Kolbe Foundation. For the Maximilian

Kolbe Foundation, its mission and its objective to work for reconciliation and to spread a culture of reconciliation Maximilian Kolbe is eminently important. In my lecture I would like to show you Maximilian Kolbe's importance for reconciliation work and the culture of reconciliation. For this reason I have titled my lecture "Maximilian Kolbe – Martyr of Reconciliation".

*From "Martyr of Charity" to "Martyr of Reconciliation"*

Maximilian Kolbe is called "Martyr of charity" and "Martyr of reconciliation". Without doubt his biography shows that he was a "Martyr of charity". Maximilian Kolbe spontaneously volunteered to take the place of a fellow inmate in Auschwitz concentration camp who was to be starved to death with nine prisoners in an underground bunker after a prisoner had escaped from the camp. The camp commander Fritsch and the duty officers were so surprised by this reaction that they agreed to Maximilian Kolbe's offer contrary to past practice. Maximilian Kolbe went to the starvation bunker and consoled the other prisoners to be starved to death with talks, prayers and hymns. They all died and only Maximilian Kolbe remained alive. On 14 August 1941 he was given a lethal injection of carbolic acid. The father of a family, Franz Gajowniczek, who was saved through Maximilian Kolbe's action, survived the concentration camp and participated in the canonization ceremony of Maximilian Kolbe in 1982 in Rome. He died in 1995 at the age of 93.

In 1941 Maximilian Kolbe was a "Martyr of charity". He was made a "Martyr of reconciliation" and gradually he proved to be a "Martyr of reconciliation". The "Martyr of charity", Maximilian Kolbe, became the "Martyr of reconciliation"! How did this happen? Already in 1963, during the Second Vatican Council the Polish and German Bishops signed a petition directed to Pope Paul VI asking for the beatification of Maximilian Kolbe. Already this common petition was an act of reconciliation between Poles and Germans who had experienced a horrible past burdened by violence. Even before the famous exchange of letters between the Polish and the German Bishops in 1965, the end of the Council, Maximilian Kolbe had been active as a reconciler between Germans and Poles with his now famous words: "We ask for forgiveness and we forgive".

In the petition of 1963, Maximilian Kolbe is described as "example and intercessor with God for reconciliation". The Polish and German participants in the Council wrote the following words to the Pope: "[We] implore for his beatification in the near future and hope that through his example and intercession the God of peace may grant both peoples to experience the grace of reconciliation with all their heart." In the course of the following decades until today, Maximilian Kolbe time and again has been called "example and patron of reconciliation"; he became a reconciler, when out of charity, he died on behalf of another man. At the beatification ceremony in 1971, even Pope Paul VI compared Maximilian Kolbe with Jesus Christ who has saved us from death through his death. He gave his life at the cross out of love for us human beings

and doing so he reconciled us with God and with one another. Maximilian Kolbe gave his life out of love for a fellow human being and doing so he pointed out that selfless love enables reconciliation and he realized it through his example and his intercession.

In 1980, the German and Polish bishops' conferences asked to canonize Maximilian Kolbe as "Martyr of faith and love". And in June 1982, German and Polish bishops together with Pope John Paul II paid a visit to the Auschwitz concentration camp. Here they again turned to the Pope and expressed their joint request to canonize Maximilian Kolbe as Martyr. "Together we want to commit ourselves to the renewal of Europe in the spirit of Jesus Christ, who was crucified. May Europe help to realize the message of love and justice in the world," they wrote.

All this happened in the "Cold War" era. Maximilian Kolbe acted - mentally and spiritually - as reconciler between Germans and Poles.

Maximilian Kolbe did not only prove to be a reconciler by the fact that he brought the Polish and German bishops together in 1963, 1971, 1980 and 1982 for joint petitions and actions. Many people in Poland and in Germany, in Ukraine and even in the whole world referred to him in their reconciliation efforts after the horrible Nazi era and the catastrophe of the Second World War. For them he was an example and intercessor in heaven. Following his example many people have initiated reconciliation efforts. This is not least shown by the Maximilian-Kolbe Werk and the Maximilian Kolbe Foundation as well as by the partnerships between German and Polish communities, the initiatives of the Conventual Franciscans and other Franciscan communities. The "Militia Immaculatae" founded by Maximilian Kolbe and many other spiritual groups also contribute to reconciliation in many fields in Europe and in the world.

Maximilian Kolbe became a "Martyr of reconciliation" by his heroic act of charity. Even today Maximilian Kolbe is an inspirer and a patron of reconciliation between nations and religions by his death on behalf of an inmate in Auschwitz concentration camp.

### *Beatification and Canonization of Maximilian Kolbe*

The Church knows two stages to declare someone to be an example and a patron for the Christians and the people: First the process of Beatification and then the process of Canonization. The highest level is the recognition as a martyr by the Canonization by the Pope.

It was not so easy for Maximilian Kolbe to be recognized by the Church as a Saint and as a Martyr. Only after a long process, which had been initiated in 1947 already, he was beatified as a "confessor" by Pope Paul VI in 1971, although – as I have already said – the German and the Polish bishops jointly had campaigned for the beatification of Maximilian Kolbe in 1963 declaring him to be an exemplary Christian being in favour of the reconciliation of mankind after World War II, especially in Europe and particularly between

Poland and Germany. Already in 1948 the Bishop of Nagasaki had written to Pope Pius XII asking him to beatify Maximilian Kolbe.

Why did it take until 1982 for Maximilian Kolbe to be canonized as a martyr? Never had anybody doubted that Maximilian Kolbe had led a heroic life of saintliness, i.e. a life according to the values and norms of the Gospel and to the life of Jesus Christ. Never had anybody doubted that his apostolic initiatives in Japan and in Niepokalanow in Poland where he used the most modern printing and administrative techniques helped to spread the Gospel and to expand the Church. Never had anybody doubted that his “Militia Immaculatae” was a work of the Holy Spirit and of evangelization. Never had anybody doubted that his offer to go into the starvation bunker for an inmate had been a heroic act of charity and that in the starvation bunker he had given witness to the Christian faith, the resurrection of the dead and to eternal life. This was taken into account in his beatification.

With the beatification in 1971 as a “confessor of the faith and of Christian life” the first obstacle for his becoming recognised as an example and intercessor for the people had been overcome and the question of martyrdom had been avoided at the same time. His death in the starvation bunker, or the reason for this made it difficult to recognise Maximilian Kolbe as a martyr.

Until 1982 the norms of the Church and the practise of beatification and canonization processes required that only persons could be declared to be martyrs who had been tortured or who had been killed by others and against their will (one must not seek martyrdom) “in odium fidei – in hatred of the faith”. When Maximilian Kolbe died in the starvation bunker in Auschwitz this had not been the case, because he had offered to die there. According to all reports there had been no hate speeches or agitation against the faith, religion or priesthood on the part of the camp commander or his officers, when Maximilian Kolbe offered to go to the starvation bunker on behalf of his inmate and these objections were presented by the “Advocatus diaboli – the Devil’s advocate” – the institution in every beatification and canonization process that has to present the arguments against beatification or canonization.

After the beatification of Maximilian Kolbe, Pope John Paul II wanted to canonize him as a martyr, as a martyr for mankind, a witness of the faith, of love and of reconciliation. After the beatification he wanted to carry out a “change of title” – from confessor to martyr – in the canonization process. Why? John Paul II had a vivid and keen sense of symbols and the effects they have. He knew the truth of the dictum “Nomen est omen – a name is an indication and has an effect”. “Martyr” means “witness” and so it is an incentive to the people. This is why John Paul II wanted to canonize Maximilian Kolbe as a martyr. Again and again the Congregation for the Causes of Saints and the respective Cardinals raised objections against this plan. Finally the Pope was left with no other choice than to change the rules for canonization. Since then not only those can be declared martyrs who were killed “in odium fidei – in hatred of the faith”, but also those who, out of Christian charity, gave their life for another human being.

In his biography “Witness to hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II” (Munich, Vienna, Zurich 2002, pages 465-468) Georg Weigel describes in detail why and how John Paul II spoke up for the canonization of Maximilian Kolbe as a martyr. The Pope prevailed (of course), canonized Maximilian Kolbe on 10 October 1982 and elevated him to the status of martyr.

### *Universal, divine love – Permitting reconciliation*

From the biography as well as from the beatification and canonization processes referring to Maximilian Kolbe the following can be concluded for reconciliation work and the establishment of a culture of reconciliation:

1. Maximilian Kolbe has become a “Martyr of reconciliation”, because he was a “Martyr of charity”! He did not lose his life “in odium fidei”, but he gave his life of his own free will “in favorem hominis – in favour of a human being” and so “in favorem humanitatis – in favour of humanity”. Humanity of human beings and of society includes reconciliation or being reconciled. It requires continuous efforts by the people and is a process which is never ended. Reconciliation and being reconciled are not possible without true love of one’s fellow men. Maximilian Kolbe learned and lived this love during his life until his death on behalf of an inmate in the Auschwitz concentration camp.
2. Reconciliation and the culture of reconciliation need a “universal” love of one’s fellow men, a love without nationalism and racism, without discrimination on grounds of religion or attitude to life. It must be based on the equality of all people in view of their dignity and their rights. By giving his life for an unknown stranger – Maximilian Kolbe did not know Franz Gajowniczek – he bore witness to this universality.

During his life Maximilian Kolbe had to gradually learn this universal love, which includes everybody without exception. When he was a young student and priest, this love was not yet fully developed. But his work in Niepokalanow, then in Japan and then again in Europe is a sign of the continuous growth of this universality of the love of his fellow men. A later text, written by him and which I would like to quote shows this love: “We should not love our neighbours, because they are pleasant or useful, rich or influential or perhaps also grateful, because then we would love them for base motives. True love looks beyond creation and becomes immersed in God. In Him, for Him and through Him it loves everybody, the good and the bad, friends and enemies. It reaches out its loving hand to everybody; it prays for everybody, suffers for everybody and wishes everybody the best. True love wants happiness for everyone, because this is God’s wish.”

Reconciliation and the culture of reconciliation need global, worldwide and universal charity which includes all people. Maximilian Kolbe learned how to live charity and he teaches us to follow his example.

3. For reconciliation we need a kind of love that exceeds human possibilities.

In his book "Minima moralia" Theodor W. Adorno wrote the sentence which has become proverbial: "There is no right life in the wrong one." This sentence is correct but nevertheless it must not have any general validity, because what is expressed therein has to be overcome. In normal life and in history it is verified again and again. If the circumstances, the conditions and the fellow human beings or, in other words, the whole life is "wrong", e.g. martial, exploitative, violent, then it is difficult or even impossible to lead a "right" life, which means a life without violence, a life in peace, in kindness, in solidarity and for the common good.

If it is generally and always true that "There is no right life in the wrong one", people and societies will never escape the spiral of violence. There has to be a right life also in the wrong one, because otherwise reconciliation after a past burdened by violence or in violent present times is not possible.

This can be demonstrated here in Auschwitz and is confirmed by the example of Maximilian Kolbe. In the terrible concentration camp, where everyone was incited against one another, where mistrust, hatred, discrimination and violence, isolation and selfishness were stirred up among the prisoners by the persons responsible for the camp in order to avoid any feelings of solidarity, there was one person who broke the spiral of violence. Maximilian Kolbe was not the only one, but he showed us that it is possible: There is a right life in the wrong one.

And what is more: He shows that this was only possible because in him and in others there existed something reaching beyond human spheres and human charity. In him and in them there was something supernatural, something divine which enabled them to live the right life in the wrong one.

This was also confirmed by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida who underlines that reconciliation requires more than just the human component. Forces have to exist which exceed human ones. In an interview about the millennium year 2000, Derrida, who claims to be an agnostic, said: "There has to be a culture of forgiveness and this culture of forgiveness also must include forgiving the unforgivable, what strictly speaking is impossible to forgive." Saying this he has the Nazi perpetrators of the Holocaust in mind. He says: "To forgive them is actually impossible. It is unforgivable what they have done." Then he adds: "Only the unforgivable can help to realize what forgiveness really means. To forgive announces something impossible. Absolution from guilt exists only in the Absolute". He concludes his thoughts by saying: "If a culture loses sight of this (im)possibility of unthinkable grace it (and, in the final analysis, we all) will always remain caught in its atrocities".

Out of the "possibility of unthinkable grace", which he drew from his belief in the inconceivable loving God and out of his superhuman or divine love, Maximilian Kolbe gave his life; for this reason he has become a "Martyr of reconciliation". The world needs reconciliation and the culture of reconciliation, because only then can solidarity, charity, humanity and the public spirit be

established. Maximilian Kolbe shows what reconciliation requires, how reconciliation can be effected and how the culture of reconciliation can be set up.

### *Conclusion*

For the Maximilian Kolbe Foundation, Maximilian Kolbe is important and he points the way to the future. We want to attain reconciliation after having experienced a history burdened by violence and we know that this requires charity and a universal as well as an all-embracing love of human beings. Nevertheless this is not enough. We need religious, transcendental forces which go beyond the human sphere. As people and nations again and again incur guilt against each other, on a European and on an international level, a culture of reconciliation has to be established which is effective and applicable in the case of injustice and violence. Maximilian Kolbe was a martyr, a witness, an example and a facilitator of reconciliation during the violent times in Auschwitz and he is still the same for all those who are seeking reconciliation after a past burdened by violence and who want to establish a culture of reconciliation today. He is our companion for a human world which is characterized by reconciliation and peace, by justice and solidarity. Maximilian Kolbe was, is and shall remain: a “Martyr of charity” and as such a “Martyr of reconciliation”.