

Heroes of the Holocaust: Poland

Blessed Mary Stella and Eleven Companions

The Nuns of Nowogrodek

In August of 1929, two members of the Order of the Holy Family of Nazareth arrived in Nowogrodek, Poland, to open a school. At first, the Sisters were not welcomed, but with time and patience they were able to overcome the animosity of the townspeople. Eventually, more Sisters arrived and by the time of the Second World War, twelve members of the Holy Family were missioned in Nowogrodek. Germany attacked Poland on September 1, 1939, and on September 17, Russian troops entered and occupied eastern Poland. While Nowogrodek remained under the control of the communist Russians, the twelve women religious were not allowed in their school or convent, not allowed to wear their religious habits and had to rely on the generosity of the townspeople to provide them with food and shelter. By 1941, the town was in German hands and the Sisters were allowed to return to their convent and wear their habits once again. It would seem the situation had improved; but then the terror started. The

Nazis began rounding up Jews and shooting them in the village square. Non-Jewish men were often arrested and either killed or deported to concentration camps. In July, 1943, Sister Mary Stella, the superior, and her companions prayed that the suffering townspeople might be spared further suffering. The prayer was simple and direct: "O God, if sacrifice of life is needed, accept it from us who are free from family obligations. Spare those who have wives and children."⁽¹⁾



Unexpectedly, on July 31, a Nazi official ordered the Sisters to report to the commissar's building that evening. Afraid they would be separated and perhaps sent to Germany for forced labor, the Sisters nonetheless went to meet their captors. One older sister, Sister Malgorzata, remained behind praying. The Sisters walked through the town and into the building. The Sisters were kept in the basement of the

building until early in the morning of August 1. Then, they were put in a van and driven to the woods outside the town. In the woods they said good-bye to each other and received the blessing of their superior. Then they knelt in front of the open grave. One by one, as the bullets were fired, the Sisters fell into the grave. After the last victim fell, the grave was filled with dirt and the soldiers returned to their barracks. A few days later the local priest, Father Zienkiewicz, and Sister Malgorzata began hearing rumors that the Sisters had been executed in the woods. It was not until five weeks later that Sister Malgorzata was able to sneak into the woods to search for the grave. When she found it, she marked the grave and periodically returned to care for it until the war ended. At the war's end, Nowogrodek was considered part of Russia and the townspeople were told they would be deported. Fearing the grave would be forgotten, Father Zienkiewicz and Sister Malgorzata had the bodies exhumed and buried near the church. It was not until 1990, when Poland was free of its communist rulers that the cause for beatification of these brave martyrs was opened. The Martyrs of Nowogrodek were beatified in 2000.

For more information:

<http://sterling.holycross.edu/departments/history/vlapomar/hiatt/nuns11.htm>



Blessed Joseph Kowalski

Joseph was born in Siedliska, Poland, on March 13, 1911. The Kowalski family lived in a village near Cracow where Joseph attended a local elementary school. When he turned eleven, his parents sent Joseph to be educated at the Don Bosco School in Auschwitz. Joseph belonged to a group known unofficially as “the Holy Brigade”⁽²⁾ whose members were deeply involved in the spiritual life of the school. In 1927, Joseph joined the Salesians and spent the next ten years studying and working in preparation for the priesthood. In 1938, he was ordained a priest and was immediately appointed to be the personal secretary of the Salesian provincial, Father Adam Cieslar. His work as a secretary did not prevent the young priest from working with young people whenever he could. He often gave conferences to young people, heard

confessions and even found time to form a youth choir.

It was his work with the young that led to his arrest by the Nazis on May 23, 1941, along with eleven other Salesians. Father Joseph was thirty years old. After a month in prison, he was sent to Auschwitz where he became Number 17350. Originally, Father Joseph was to be deported to Dachau along with sixty other priests and brothers. Those ready for transport were standing naked in the bath house when one of the officers came in and began inspecting them. Seeing Father Joseph clenching his fist, the officer hit him and the priest’s rosary fell to the floor. The officer ordered the priest to step on the rosary. When Father Joseph refused, he was taken from the group and remained at Auschwitz where he was assigned to the hard labor gang. In the midst of the work and deprivations of the concentration camp, Father Joseph managed to bring comfort, hope and faith to other suffering prisoners. In a letter to his parents during his time in the camp Father Joseph wrote: “Do not worry about me; I am in God’s hands. I want to assure you that I feel His help at every step. Despite the present situation, I am happy and completely at peace.”⁽³⁾ The priest’s last day on earth was witnessed by many of his fellow prisoners. One hot day, July 3, 1942, the guards at the camp seemed to go crazy. They took out their fury on the prisoners as cruelly as possible. Throughout the day, prisoners would

be chosen at random; some were drowned in a cesspool, some were thrown into a muddy canal, some were pushed into a barrel that normally held the dogs used by the SS. Father Joseph was among those beaten and thrown into the cesspool. When he was dragged from the pool he wore only his trousers and was covered with mud and filth. The guards thought it would be amusing for the priest to “bless” the prisoners being tortured. On this blood-filled ground, Father Joseph knelt, made the Sign of the Cross and began to pray out loud. What effect these prayers had on the guards we may never know, but to one of the prisoners it was “a prayer like the world has never heard”.⁽⁴⁾ In the early morning of July 4, Father Joseph’s body was recovered from the cesspool where he had been drowned. He was beatified in 1999, one of a group of one hundred eight Polish martyrs of the Second World War.



Blessed Hilary Januszewski

Paul Januszewski was born on June 11, 1907, in Krajenki, Poland. After attending local schools, he entered the Carmelite order in 1927, where he received the name Hilary. In 1930, Brother Hilary was sent to Rome to study at the Carmelite College of St. Albert. During his time in Rome, the young friar was described as a “silent and prudent man, who loved studying”.

⁽⁵⁾ While in Rome, he made his perpetual vows and, in 1934, he was ordained a priest. Upon his return to Cracow, Poland, Father Hilary was made a professor of Dogmatic Theology and Church History. He was also made prefect of the clerical students, community bursar, sacristan and rector of a popular Marian shrine. Shortly after World War II began in 1939, Father Hilary was made prior (superior) of the Cracow Carmel. Not only was he young for such an important position, just thirty-two, he also had the

added burden of dealing with the German occupation of his homeland, which brought such misery and destruction to Poland. In the midst of these hardships, the new prior continued to follow the Carmelite Rule.

In September, 1940, the Nazis came to the Carmel and arrested six Carmelite priest and brothers. Father Hilary did all he could to secure their release. Later, in December of 1940, the Germans came back to the Carmel to arrest Father Konoba. Father Hilary began to argue with them; if the Nazis wanted someone who could work for them they should arrest him as Father Konoba was not well. The Nazis accepted the priest’s offer and arrested the prior. In prison, Father Hilary was reunited with his fellow Carmelites and together they began their journey to Calvary. From prison in Cracow to the concentration camps of Auschwitz and Dachau, Father Hilary was an example of spiritual and physical support. He continued his life of prayer and encouraged his fellow prisoners, giving part of his own inadequate bread ration to those in greater need. Father Hilary’s devotion to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and his devotion to Mary gave him the strength he needed to console the suffering in spite of his own suffering. As the Allied forces drew nearer, executions in Dachau increased. Another enemy was disease, especially typhoid fever. The fever was rampant in Block 25 where the Russian soldiers were housed. Knowing that the Poles and Russians were bit-

ter enemies, the camp commander gave the Polish priests an opportunity to practice the charity they so often spoke about. One morning the commander told the priests they could go help care for the sick Russian prisoners. The prisoners knew that the Allies would soon liberate the camp and that anyone who tried to nurse the Russians would probably catch the fever and die. Father Hilary was one of the brave volunteers even as he told a fellow priest, "You know that I'll not get out of there alive".⁽⁶⁾ For twenty-one days, Father Hilary was able to serve the dying until he caught typhoid fever. He died on March 26, 1945. On April 29, the American Army liberated Dachau. When the Americans went into Block 25, they found hundreds of corpses. Father Hilary had led a "selfless, quiet, silent life, founded upon deep prayer and service of others".⁽⁷⁾ By human standards he never did anything extraordinary, but his hidden life of service gave him the grace he needed to help others in spite of his own sufferings. Like Christ, he gave all he had, even his own life. Father Hilary was beatified in 1999.

For more information:

<http://www.carmelites.org.au/januszewski.htm>

Five Martyrs of Poznan

These five young men, who lived in Poznan, Poland, during the German occupation of their country, were martyred because they would not abandon their religious beliefs. This “group of five”⁽⁸⁾ had become friends through their membership in the Oratory, a Catholic youth group founded by the Salesians. The Oratory aided their growth in the spiritual life and encouraged their apostolic work.



**Edward Klinik
(died at 23)**

Edward was the second of three children. He studied at the Salesian school in Auschwitz. Upon returning to Poznan, he joined the Oratory. His prayer life deepened as his devotion to the Holy Eucharist and Mary also grew. “In the group of five he stood out because of his deep commitment to every form of activity and was the more serious and thoughtful one.”⁽⁹⁾ When Poland fell to the Nazis he found work in a construction company and continued his membership in the Oratory.



**Francis Kesy
(died at 22)**

Francis was born in Berlin to Polish parents. His parents returned to Poland and settled in Poznan where his father was able to find work. Francis was the third of five children born to this poor couple. He desired to become a Salesian but was unable to fulfill his dream because of the Nazi occupation of Poland. He found work in a factory but spent all his spare time at the Oratory. “He was sensitive, frail and in poor health; but at the same time he was cheerful, good-natured, loved animals and always ready to help others.”⁽¹⁰⁾ Francis attended Mass every morning and said the rosary every evening.



**Jarogniew
Wojciechowski
(died at 20)**

Jarogniew was born in Poznan. His father was an alcoholic who abandoned the family so he was cared for by an older sister. Jarogniew joined in the outings at the Oratory and became a daily communicant. He was known for his friendliness and good humor. “He stood out from the others because he seemed more reflective. He tried to see what lay behind events”.

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**Czeslaw
Jozwiak (died at
22)**

Czeslaw's schooling was interrupted because of the war and so he worked in a chemist's shop. He had joined the

Oratory at age ten and was known to be spontaneous and full of energy, "good-natured and genuinely pure of heart and soul."⁽¹²⁾



**Edward
Kazmierski
(died at 23)**

Edward was born in Poznan to a poor family. Poverty caused Edward to begin working after finishing his elementary education. At the Oratory, Edward was given an opportunity to develop his musical gifts. As he grew in his devotion to Mary and the Holy Eucharist, he also sang in the church choir and wrote musical compositions. "He was emotionally well balanced and kind."⁽¹³⁾

When the Germans occupied Poznan, it became a crime to celebrate Holy Mass in church and for the young people to gather in the Oratory. Many of the Salesian buildings were taken over and used for military purposes. Undaunted by these events, the five men were determined to keep the Ora-

tory alive. Although their youth group had been suppressed, they met wherever they could—in city parks or in the woods. These meetings were discovered and during the month of September of 1940, all five men were arrested. They were sent from Poznan to a prison in Germany. Because of their membership in a Catholic organization, the young men were questioned, tortured, and sentenced to hard labor. On August 1, 1942, they were sentenced to death for treason. Before his execution, Czeslaw wrote to his parents: "I have to leave this world, but I want you to know that going in this way to the next world gives me greater joy than if I were set free."⁽¹⁴⁾

This sums up beautifully the attitude of the young men who were going to die for their faith without betraying their ideals or their friendship. On August 24, 1942, they were taken to the prison yard and beheaded. They were among the group of one hundred eight martyrs beatified in 1999.

St. Maximilian Kolbe

Martyr of Charity

The future saint was born in Zdunska, Poland, on January 7, 1894, and baptized Raymond. As a young boy, Raymond was a worry to his mother. He always seemed to be getting into trouble. One day, the worried mother noticed a significant change in her youthful rebel. When she pressed him for an answer to his changed lifestyle, Raymond replied that he had asked the Virgin Mary what would become of him. Mary appeared to Raymond and asked him to choose one of two crowns—the red crown of martyrdom or the white crown of purity. Raymond chose both. On September 4, 1910, Raymond received the Franciscan habit and the name Maximilian. While studying in Rome, the zealous friar founded the Militia of Mary Immaculate, also known as the Knights of the Immaculata. The purpose of this group is to spread devotion to Mary, the Mother of God. Brother Maximilian was ordained to the holy priesthood in Rome in 1918, and then returned home to Poland. Father Kolbe realized that modern methods of communication (i.e., radio, press) could be used to teach millions of people about Christ. In 1927, after much prayer and suffering, Father Kolbe was allowed to establish a new friary that would use modern means of communication to spread the Gospel message. The friary was located near Warsaw and

given the name Niepokalanow, “City of the Immaculata”. In true Franciscan spirit, the friary was very poor, yet that did not stop its growth. Over the next ten years, the friary would grow to over seven hundred members. This dedicated group printed catechetical and devotional material, a daily newspaper and a monthly magazine. In 1930, Father Kolbe traveled to Nagasaki, Japan, and opened a new City of the Immaculata. The atomic bomb which destroyed Nagasaki spared the City of the Immaculata. The friars were thus able to care for the many orphans of the bombing. Throughout these years, Father Kolbe was continually plagued with ill-health, especially tuberculosis, which would force him to rest. In his articles and talks, Father Kolbe had never hesitated to condemn Nazism and Communism. So, when the Germans occupied Poland, the friar was prepared for the worst.

In 1939, Father Kolbe was arrested by the Gestapo but was released. In February of 1941, he was arrested again. On May 28, 1941, he was shipped to Auschwitz concentration camp. In the Nazi death camps, being a priest meant receiving “special” treatment. Priests were subjected to physical and mental abuse as well as given extra work to do. Father Kolbe, worn out physically, was still able to inspire his fellow prisoners. One fellow inmate recalls: “Even though suffering intense pain, Maximilian heard the confessions of others, prayed with them and often gave them little conferences on Mary.

He was a priest every inch of his burned-out body.”⁽¹⁵⁾ In August of 1941, a prisoner escaped from Auschwitz. In retaliation, ten prisoners were chosen at random to die in the starvation bunker. When one of those chosen wept over leaving his wife and children behind, Father Kolbe asked to take the man’s place in the bunker. When the camp commandant asked the priest why he wanted to do such a thing, Father Kolbe’s simple reply was, “Because I am a Catholic priest”. The group was placed in the starvation bunker and left. Instead of giving into despair as so many before them had done, this group of condemned men spent their final days in song and prayer with Father Kolbe as their spiritual guide. After two weeks in the bunker, only Father Kolbe and three others were left alive. They were given a lethal injection of carbolic acid on August 14, 1941, the eve of the Assumption. The next day, Father Kolbe’s remains were cremated. In 1982, Father Kolbe was canonized as a martyr and given the title “patron of our difficult century”. He has become the patron of journalists, families, prisoners, the pro-life movement and the chemically addicted.

For more information:

<http://www.marytown.com/>

For the writings of St. Maximilian

Kolbe: <http://www.consecration.com/archives.html>



Blessed Alphonsus Mary Mazurek

Joseph Mazurek was born March 1, 1891, in Baranowka, Poland. He attended the Minor Seminary of the Discalced Carmelites and in 1908, received the Carmelite habit and the name Alphonsus Mary of the Holy Spirit. He was ordained a priest in July, 1916. Because of his ability as an organizer and educator, Father Alphonsus was made prefect and professor at the minor seminary he had attended as a youth. He continued at the seminary until 1930 when he was elected prior (superior) of the Carmelite monastery at Czerna. It was at this monastery that he would work and live until his death. The new prior threw himself into his new responsibilities. Although the monastery was far from town, Father Alphonsus rekindled the apostolic work of the group. He also organized Carmelite devotions. The prior impressed all with his zeal and dedication to his priestly and religious vocation.

The Nazis had begun occupying the area in 1939, but this did not stop the Carmelites from living their religious lives to the full. In spite of the threat of retaliation, the Carmelites continued to accept novices into their community and helped the refugees as best they could. In August of 1944, one of the Carmelite novices was shot. Shortly afterwards, the Nazis forced the friars to another village to dig war trenches. Father Alphonsus Mary was separated from his community and forced into a car where he was assaulted. When the car finally stopped Father Alphonsus was pushed out and told to start walking. Soldiers fired at him and the priest fell. When the murderers realized he was not dead, they filled his mouth with dirt, put his body in a horse drawn carriage and drove to a nearby cemetery. Providentially, the carriage passed the other friars on their way to dig the trenches. One of his brother priests was able to give Father Alphonsus absolution before he died. Throughout his torture and death, the priest had a rosary clutched in his hands. The Carmelites buried their prior and despite the curfew, many people attended the funeral. Father Alphonsus was murdered on August 28, 1944, at the age of fifty-three. In a letter to Carmelites throughout the world, the Superior General of the Carmelite order calls Father Alphonsus's martyrdom the "crowning of a life of fidelity".⁽¹⁶⁾ Father Alphonsus himself, in his writings states: "All our sanctity and perfection consists in conforming ourselves to the will of God, which is the

sole and supreme rule of perfection and of holiness.”⁽¹⁷⁾ For his fellow Carmelites and the people of the surrounding area, Father Alphonsus was immediately revered as a martyr. In September, 1945, the Carmelites at Czerna built a monument over the spot where Father Alphonsus was shot. On the monument it says, in part, “...We do not pray for you; because the enemy has snapped the thread of an innocent’s life; since, when the earth bled, the Lord looked for the victim who had overcome hatred by love.”⁽¹⁸⁾ Father Alphonus Mary was one of the one hundred eight Polish martyrs beatified in 1999.

For more information:

http://www.o.cd.pcn.net/mazur_en.htm

Footnotes

1. Rev. Vincent A. Lapomarda, SJ. 1997-2000 College of the Holy Cross. Hiatt Holocaust Collection.
2. Father Juan Vecchi, "The Martyrs of Poland," Salesian Magazine, 51, no.1 (Winter, 2000): 5.
3. Vecchi, 6.
4. Vecchi, 7.
5. Fr. Joseph Chalmers, OCD, "Hilary Januszewski: Faithful in little, faithful in much", Letter of the Prior General of the Carmelites, June, 1999.
6. Redemptus Maria Valabek, OCD, "Greater Love than This...Father Hilary Januszewski, O.Carm., Carmel in the World, XXX, no,3 (1991), 216.
7. Chalmers.
8. Vecchi, 9.
9. Vecchi, 8.
10. Vecchi, 8.
11. Vecchi, 8.
12. Vecchi, 9.
13. Vecchi, 9.
14. Vecchi, 10.
15. Boniface Hanly, OFM, Ten Christians, (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1979), 116.
16. Circular letter of Father Camilo Maccise, OCD, Superior General, for the beatification of Alphonsus Mary Mazurek "Fidelity and Martyrdom", (March, 1999).
17. Writings of Blessed Alphonsus Mary Mazurek
18. Circular letter of Fr. Camilo Maccise.