

## 22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time - 2022 C

Two weeks ago was the feast of St. Maximilian Kolbe. Though his observance got bumped this year because it fell on a Sunday, his life and martyr's death is a perfect illustration of the Gospel today, and the words at its heart: ***Give your place to this man.***

In the same years that Jesus appeared to St. Faustina asking that His Divine Mercy be honored, Father Kolbe was serving as a Polish Franciscan priest. His outspoken criticism of Hitler led to his arrest in 1941 and his eventual imprisonment in Auschwitz – a place whose sole purpose was to defeat faith, and hope, and love – a place where the idea of mercy seemed utterly unimaginable. There was an escape from the camp that July, and to deter further escape attempts, ten prisoners were chosen at random to starve to death. One of the ten, Francis Gajowniczek (GA YOW NI CHEK), broke down and sobbed – “Please, think of my wife and children!” Eyewitnesses tell how Fr. Kolbe came out of the ranks of prisoners, walked up to the camp commander and said, “Herr Kommandant, I wish to make a request, please.” Intrigued and a bit amused at this boldness, the Kommandant asked: “What do you want?” In utter calm, Maximilian Kolbe replied: ***“I want to die in place of this prisoner.”*** Whether this Gospel was in his mind ... ***give your place to this man*** ... history does not tell. But those who were there do tell how the Kommandant, despite his power of life and death over these men, was no longer amused ... instead, he became nervous and literally, took a step back. Perhaps he sensed that here was a power far greater than his own. Fr. Kolbe was the last of the ten to die after almost two weeks, his last days spent in prayer and in consoling his fellow prisoners in their final hours.

The man whose place he took survived the camp and was at his canonization in 1982. What must it have been like to wake up every day and realize, “I am alive because another lived literally the words of a

parable, *give your place to this man?* What kind of gratitude and sense of responsibility did he feel for his unexpected second chance because another, whom he did not even know, was giving his place to him, rooted in the humble imitation of Jesus, Who had proclaimed: “there is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

“*Give your place to this man*” is at first glance an invitation to humility, not thinking less of ourselves but simply thinking of ourselves less. But even more, it is a foreshadowing of what Jesus Himself has done ... laying down His life that His place becomes ours. As the Creed says, Jesus has a place at the right hand of the Father, united in the Spirit’s bond of love – and being made members of His Body in Baptism, and sharing over and over in His life in the Eucharist, we too have that place prepared for us.

Sometimes, like Fr. Kolbe, Jesus gives people His place at the Cross. As we strive to help them in even simple ways, we humble ourselves, as the Lord has done – *not thinking less of ourselves but simply thinking of ourselves less*. None of us will likely be asked to make the sacrifice of love Fr. Kolbe made, but each time we give a place to another in our concern, we too have the chance to reflect the love of Jesus, Who gives His place in God’s merciful love to us.