

Curley friar recalls visit with Maximilian Kolbe

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Not everyone gets to go bike riding with a saint.

But that's exactly what one newly ordained Franciscan priest from Baltimore did nearly 60 years ago when he visited St. Maximilian Kolbe at the Polish saint's huge Franciscan compound outside Warsaw.

Father Conrad Miller, O.S.F., Conv., who is now celebrating his diamond jubilee as a priest, looks back to that historic visit as one of the highlights of his priesthood.

"Kolbe very much impressed me as a holy person," remembered Father Miller, a chaplain at Archbishop Curley High School in Baltimore. "You could actually see that he was though and through a very holy man. He had to be to attract such tremendous crowds."

More than 800 friars were stationed on Father Kolbe's 400-acre compound when Father Miller made his stop there in August 1939. He had been in Europe working on doctoral studies along with other American friars just before World War II broke out.

As Father Miller pedaled his bike through the mountain complex alongside Father Kolbe, he remembers being overwhelmed with the size and order of the future saint's compound. Everywhere they went, Father Miller said, there were friars busily at work or at prayer. Some were herding cattle, some tending pigs and chickens, others plowing the fields, and still others working on laundry. What most impressed him were the huge, sophisticated printing presses Father Kolbe used to publish religious tracts on Jesus and the Blessed Virgin Mary.

"Some of the guys would kid him and ask him what St. Francis would think if he saw all that expensive equipment," Father Miller remembered. "Kolbe said, 'St. Francis would roll up his sleeves and go to work like the rest of us would.'"

Father Miller said he wasn't at all surprised that just two years after he had visited

Father Kolbe, the Polish leader volunteered to take the place of a married Jewish man who was sentenced to death at the Nazi death camp in Auschwitz - an act of selfless love that would lead to Father Kolbe's canonization in 1982.

"He was very serious about the Franciscan way of life," Father Miller explained. "He took his vows of poverty very strictly and told us to be good Franciscans not only in word, but in deed. He was a true Franciscan."

In his own 60 years as a priest, Father Miller has tried to take Father Kolbe's advice to heart. He has spent much of his time working as a confessor at parishes across the country and at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, where he heard confessions in English, Polish, Italian and French. He has also served as a college professor, retreat master and pastor around the U.S. and in Montreal, Canada. Since 1982, he has been stationed at Archbishop Curley High School, where he celebrated his 60th jubilee Mass Oct. 25.

As he recovers from recent spinal surgery that has made it difficult for him to walk, Father Miller said he remembers the example of Father Kolbe, who suffered poor health throughout his life without complaint.

"Every time I look at Kolbe's picture, I say, 'Maxi, help me get to Heaven,'" Father Miller noted with a smile. "I pray to him every day."