An Astonishing Miracle of Divine Mercy at Auschwitz

by K.V. Turley....

“Proclaim that mercy is the greatest attribute of God.”

I have visited Auschwitz only once.

It is not a place to which I wish to return any time soon.

Although that visit was many years ago, Auschwitz is a place one does not forget.

Whether it is the large silent rooms with glass screens, behind which lie the stacked remains of the confiscated clothes and luggage, spectacles and identity cards or (worse still) the extracted teeth or hair from the inmates of that concentration camp; or, the still-lingering smell of gas around the chimneys of the camp incinerator; or the fact that what is said about birdsong not being heard at Auschwitz is true — whatever it is, Auschwitz is not an easy place to forget. Like a bad dream it lingers in one's waking memory. Only this was a nightmare all too real for those unfortunate enough to be incarcerated within its razor-wire fences.

St. Maximilian Kolbe

One such inmate was the Polish priest, now martyr-saint, Maximilian Kolbe. He arrived in Auschwitz May 28, 1941. No longer a man with a name, he had become instead Prisoner No. 16670.

Two months later, Kolbe offered his life to save another prisoner who was previously unknown to the priest but who had been sentenced to death by starvation. Kolbe's offer was accepted. He was consigned to the starvation bunker in the basement of Block 11, known as the "Death Block." Eventually, Kolbe died Aug. 14, 1941, after having been given a lethal injection.

Having visited the block where the saint had given his life, it was time to leave Auschwitz. In fact, if truth be known, I couldn't get away quick enough from the place.

The Fall of Rudolf Höss

Years later I heard an unexpected story about Auschwitz. Yet, perhaps, it is not so unexpected after all. In that camp where so much evil abounded, there, too, grace was to be found.

Rudolf Höss, the former commandant of Auschwitz, was born into a devout German Catholic family. World War One followed an unhappy childhood. Aged just 17 years, Höss served in the German Imperial Army as a noncommissioned officer. In the national chaos that followed his country's defeat, Höss returned home. Soon he was involved with right-wing paramilitary groups.

It was in Munich in March 1922 that his life was changed forever. For it was then that he heard the voice of a "prophet," calling him once more to the cause of the Fatherland. It was a decisive moment for the future commandant of Auschwitz, as the voice that transfixed him was that of Adolf Hitler.

It was also the moment when the 21-year-old Höss renounced his Catholic faith.

From that moment on Höss' path was clear. There followed his involvement in a Nazi-inspired murder — then imprisonment, before his eventual release in 1928 as part of a general amnesty for prisoners. Thereafter, he became acquainted with the head of the SS, Heinrich Himmler. And soon Höss was party to Hitler's extermination camps. Another World War brought the eventual destruction of the Fatherland. A botched escape attempt from the advancing Allies brought Höss to a court at Nuremberg to face charges of perpetrating war crimes.

"I commanded Auschwitz until 1 December 1943, and estimate that at least 2,500,000 victims were executed and exterminated there by gassing and burning, and at least another half-million succumbed to starvation and disease, making a total of about 3,000,000 dead," Höss admitted to his captors.

The verdict was never in doubt. Neither was the penalty: In that same courtroom, the 45-year-old Höss was sentenced to death by hanging.

The Salvation of Rudolf Höss

The day after the verdict, former inmates of Auschwitz petitioned the court that Höss' execution take place on the grounds of the former death camp. German POWs were instructed to erect a gallows there.

Somewhere, buried under the debris of his years worshipping a false prophet, there remained the fact of his baptism, his Catholic upbringing and, some say, his early desire to be a priest. Whether it was the residue of these things or simply fear, Höss, knowing he was about to die, asked to see a priest.

His captors struggled to find one. Desperate, Höss remembered a name: Father Władysław Lohn. This Polish Jesuit was the sole survivor of a Jesuit community that had perished in Auschwitz years earlier. The Gestapo had arrested the Krakow Jesuits and sent them to Auschwitz. Jesuit superior Fr. Lohn, on discovering what had happened, went to the camp. He was brought before the Commandant. The priest, who was subsequently allowed to depart unharmed, had impressed Höss. Now that his execution approached Höss asked his captors to find the priest.

It was April 4, 1947 — Good Friday.

In the end, and just in time, they found him. On April 10, 1947, Fr. Lohn heard Höss' confession, and the next day, the Friday of Easter Week, the condemned man received Holy Communion.

The following day the prisoner wrote to his wife:

"Based on my present knowledge, I can see today clearly, severely and bitterly for me, that the entire ideology about the world in which I believed so firmly and unswervingly was based on completely wrong premises. … And so my actions in the service of this ideology were completely wrong. … My turning away from my belief in God was based on completely wrong premises. It was a hard struggle. But I have again found my faith in my God."

The Last Execution in Block 11

On the morning of April 16, 1947, military guards stood around Auschwitz as Höss arrived. He was taken to the building that had once been the commandant's office. There, he asked for and was given a cup of coffee. Having drunk it, he was led to a cell in Block 11 — the "Death Block" — the same block in which St. Maximilian Kolbe had died. Here Höss was to wait.

Two hours later he was led from Block 11. His captors noticed how calm the handcuffed prisoner was as he walked briskly through the camp to the waiting gallows. The executioners had to help Höss climb onto the stool placed above the gallows trapdoor.

The sentence was read out as the hangman placed a noose around the neck of the condemned man who, at this site, had ordered the death of so many others. Then, as a silence fell, the hangman stood back, and removed the stool.

After his death, a letter written by Höss was published in Polish newspapers. It read thus:

"In the solitude of my prison cell, I have come to the bitter recognition . . . I caused unspeakable suffering … but the Lord God forgave me."

God's Greatest Attribute

In 1934 Höss had joined *SS-Totenkopfverbände*. These were the SS Death Head's Units, tasked with the administration of Nazi concentration camps. Later that year, in his new designation, he took up his first posting at Dachau.

In 1934 Sister, later Saint, Faustina Kowalska started to keep a diary detailing the revelations she was experiencing of what later would become the devotion known as the Divine Mercy.

In her diary these words are attributed to Our Lord: “Proclaim that mercy is the greatest attribute of God.”

When in April 1947 Höss’ captors went to look for Fr. Lohn, they found him in nearby Krakow.

He was praying at the Shrine of Divine Mercy.

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