

# St. Paul

[TEAM #1]

When we first encounter Saint Paul, he is supporting the unjust killing of Saint Stephen, providing aid and encouragement by watching over the cloaks of the stone throwers (Acts 7:58). He was at that time a Pharisee known as Saul and we read in the New Testament how he had wanted to destroy the nascent Church. In his zeal for his own beliefs, he dragged believers in Christ out of their homes, handed them over for imprisonment and even plotted their deaths (Acts 8:3, 22:4).

One day, with a commission in hand to hunt down Christians, Saul was on the road to Damascus when “a light from the sky suddenly flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ He said, ‘Who are you, sir?’ The reply came, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting’” (Acts 9:3-5).

Coming as it did from heaven, the voice was clearly indicating that Jesus is in fact the Lord and, further, that he identified with the Church – Christ and his Church are one. Thus, to persecute the Church is to persecute the Lord Jesus himself. We can imagine the apprehension felt by the great persecutor of the Church at that moment. Yet, instead of the worldly justice of punishment and death coming down upon him for the evils done by him, Saul received God’s loving mercy and pardon.

This man who had rejected Christ and tried to destroy his Church would never forget the mercy shown him. He took the name Paul and for the rest of his life professed the Gospel and, in a special way, the wholly gratuitous and undeserved mercy of God. “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Of these I am the foremost,” Paul freely confessed in his First Letter to Timothy, noting with gratitude, “I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and an arrogant man, but I have been mercifully treated” (1 Timothy 1:15, 13).

Of the many lessons to be drawn from the conversion of Saint Paul, one of the most important in this Jubilee of Mercy is that there is no sin so great that God will not forgive. None of us should think our sins are just too horrible or awful that they are unforgiveable. God knows that we have sinned; he knows that sometimes these sins are grave and unspeakable.

“When faced with the gravity of sin,” says Pope Francis, “God responds with the fullness of mercy. Mercy will always be greater than any sin, and no one can place limits on the love of God who is ever ready to forgive” (Misericordiae Vultus, 3). That is the whole reason the Lord came among us and suffered for us on the Cross – so that we might be redeemed.

Another lesson for this day is that the Lord is active in seeking our redemption, he takes the initiative. God does not wish to leave us alone in the throes of evil (Id.). Perhaps our experiences are not as dramatic the divine intervention Paul received on the road to Damascus, but the Lord does go forward and reach out to each of us, speaking to our hearts and speaking to us through the Church. God calls us to conversion as well.

Following his conversion, with the grace of God, the great persecutor of the Church became the great missionary apostle. The Lord calls Paul his “chosen instrument” to spread the Gospel to the world (Acts 9:15), and he would travel all around what is now Greece and Turkey before coming to Rome, proclaiming salvation and eternal life in Jesus Christ. Paul confirms that it was part of God’s plan that through him, the foremost sinner, “Christ Jesus might display all his patience as an example for those who would come to believe in him for everlasting life” (1 Timothy 1:15-16).

Thus, we find a third meaning in the conversion of Saint Paul – the Lord will make major saints out of unlikely personalities. He will bring good out of bad. This is the way the Lord works.

Although we might stray from the Lord in sin, although we might oppose the Church’s teachings and even oppress the body of Christ, we are never lost. God never abandons us. In his infinite merciful love, the Lord comes into the world to redeem us and offer us a new life. More than that, he wants to give us his grace to be a great saint, to be a great missionary disciple in our own portion of the world.

# St. John Vianney

[TEAM #2]

St. John Vianney, (Patron Saint of parish priests) was a true shepherd of God's love and mercy. Through powerful Spiritual Works of Mercy, St. John Vianney dedicated his life to nurturing lost souls of sinners and inspired them with the truth of God's mercy: "God Himself runs after the sinner and makes him return to Him." Saint John Vianney taught his parishioners primarily by the witness of his own life. It was from his example that they learned to pray, halting frequently before the tabernacle for a visit to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. His reputation as a confessor and director of souls made him known throughout the Christian world.

He became internationally notable for his priestly and pastoral work in his parish because of the radical spiritual transformation of the community and its surroundings. He heard confessions of people from all over the world for the sixteen hours each day, and his life was filled with works of charity and love.

As he explained to himself and his flock: "There are no two good ways of serving God. There is only one: serve him as he desires to be served." He considered this the golden rule for a life of obedience: "Do only what can be offered to the good Lord."

# St. Maximilian Kolbe

[TEAM #3]

He began life on Jan. 8, 1894 as Raymond Kolbe, the second son of a weaver in a town called Zdunska Wola in Poland, near Lodz. As a boy, Ray, as he was known, showed a strong mischievous streak and had a penchant for getting into hot water.

That changed forever when a seemingly tiny incident became the pivot point of his life.

One day, Ray got caught in his usual antics, which elicited a scolding from his mother. The tongue-lashing deeply bothered young Ray. He was sad, not for the punishment, but because he had hurt his mother. Later, he wrote about the effect of the incident: "That night I asked the mother of God what was to become of me. Then she came to me holding two crowns, one white, the other red. She asked if I was willing to accept either of these crowns. The white one meant that I should persevere in purity, and the red that I should become a martyr. I said that I would accept them both."

Ray wasn't sure if it was a dream or a vision, but it didn't matter what he called the experience. Dream or not, the experience had a vivid reality to it, and it stayed with him the rest of his life. He saw the events of his life in terms of the white and red crowns.

When he was only 16 years old, Raymond Kolbe joined the Franciscans, taking the name Maximilian. As a Franciscan, he enjoyed a varied ministry, writing and publishing articles, teaching history in Poland, and building friaries in Warsaw; Nagasaki, Japan, and India. Then God began to fulfill young Ray's dream of Mary and the two crowns.

Our Lady, as it turned out, would be handing him the red crown.

In 1936, the Franciscans recalled Fr. Kolbe from Asia so he could supervise the Warsaw friary. The darkness of war, however, cast a long shadow over Europe and the world. Father Maximilian could see it coming. When Hitler invaded Poland in 1939, no one had to draw Fr. Maximilian a map. He knew what that meant. He knew that the Nazis would seize the friary.

Instead of fretting over this bad news, Fr. Kolbe went into action. He told his friars they were free to return to their homes, asking only a small number to remain behind to help implement a plan. Father Maximilian got the word out that refugees were welcome at the friary. Soon, the innocent victims of war made their way to the refuge. Thousands of people spent time with the friars, receiving shelter, food, clothing, and care. Some two-third of the refugees were Jews.

The Franciscans' works of mercy, though, drew the attention of the Nazis, and in May 1941, the government shut down the friary and sent Fr. Maximilian and four other brothers to the death camp at Auschwitz, Poland.

Amid this unsettling, he wrote home to his mother. In a letter dated June 15, he told her:

Dear Mama, At the end of the month of May I was transferred to the camp of Auschwitz. Everything is well in my regard. Be tranquil about me and about my health, because the good God is everywhere and provides for everything with love. It would be well that you do not write to me until you have received other news from me, because I do not know how long I will stay here. Cordial greetings and kisses, affectionately, Raymond.

Father Maximilian's" words hinting at a short stay proved prophetic. Two months later, he would be dead.

'Let me take his place'

In late July, a prisoner from Fr. Kolbe's barracks went missing. The Nazis presumed that he escaped. They invoked their standard rule in such cases: If someone escaped, 10 men from the same barracks would be killed in his place. The condemned would be locked in the starvation bunker, going without food and water until they died a long, tortuous death.

The prisoners from Fr. Kolbe's barracks were ordered to assemble before camp Commandant Karl Fritsch.

"You will all pay for this," Fritsch told the men. He then chose the unlucky 10. One of those was a man named Francis Gajowniczek. He broke down.

"My poor wife!" Gajowniczek screamed. "My poor children! What will they do?"

The men froze, not knowing how Commandant Fritsch would react. Father Maximilian walked forward to Fritsch, removed his hat, and told him, "I am a Catholic priest. Let me take his place. I am old. He has a wife and children."

Fritsch said nothing. He gazed at the priest for several seconds, before speaking.

"What does this Polish pig want?"

"I am a Catholic priest," Fr. Maximilian repeated. "Let me take his place. I am old. He has a wife and children."

The request was granted.

Years later, Francis Gajowniczek remembered the moment:

I could only thank him with my eyes. I was stunned and could hardly grasp what was going on. The immensity of it: I, the condemned, am to live and someone else willingly and voluntarily offers his life for me, a stranger. Is this some dream?

I was put back into my place without having had time to say anything to Maximilian Kolbe. I was saved. ... The news spread quickly all around the camp. It was the first and last time that such an incident happened in the whole history of Auschwitz.

Maximilian and the nine other men were immediately hustled to Building 13, the infamous starvation bunker. They were literally thrown down the stairs and locked in. Amazingly, an eyewitness account survives of what the men went through in the hole of Building 13. It came from Bruno Borgowiec, one of the prisoners assigned to service the death bunker.

'This priest is really a great man'

Borgowiec told his story before he died in 1947:

The ten condemned men went through terrible days. From the underground cell in which they were shut up there continually arose the echo of prayers and canticles. The man in charge of emptying the buckets of urine found them always empty. Thirst drove the prisoners to drink the contents. Since they had grown very weak, prayers were only whispered. At every inspection, when almost all the others were lying on the floor, Father Kolbe was seen kneeling or standing in the centre as he looked cheerfully in the face of the SS men.

Father Kolbe never asked for anything and did not complain. Rather, he encouraged the others, saying that the fugitive might be found and then they would all be freed. One of the SS guards remarked, "This priest is really a great man. We have never seen anyone like him."

Two weeks passed in this way. Meanwhile, one after another they died, until only Father Kolbe was left. This the authorities felt was too long. The cell was needed for new victims. So one day they brought in the head of the sick quarters, a German named Bock, who gave Father Kolbe an injection of carbolic acid in the vein of his left arm. Father Kolbe, with a prayer on his lips, himself gave his arm to the executioner. Unable to watch this, I left under the pretext of work to be done. Immediately after the SS men had left, I returned to the cell, where I found Father Kolbe leaning in a sitting position against the back wall with his eyes open and his head drooping sideways. His face was calm and radiant.

The date was Aug. 14, 1941.

Maximilian's remains were sent to the crematorium. No special notice was made of his death.

Except for the word of what he had done.

God's Will Be Done

The story raced through Auschwitz and into immortality. One survivor of the camp talked of what the news of Fr. Maximilian's sacrifice did for the prisoners, saying it was "a shock filled with hope, bringing new life and strength." He likened it to "a powerful shaft of light in the darkness of the camp."

Francis Gajowniczek lived to be 95 years old. Maximilian Kolbe bought him 53 years of life. When he returned to his hometown after being freed by the Allies from the death camp, Francis discovered that his two sons had died in the war. Only his wife survived.

Francis never forgot Fr. Maximilian. Every year on Aug. 14, he went back to Auschwitz, descended the stairs to Building 13, and prayed to the saint-priest.

The cell where the 10 men died has been preserved as a shrine. Perhaps the supreme irony in the sacrifice of Fr. Maximilian lies in the fact that the "escaped" prisoner had not escaped at all. He had drowned in a latrine. The officers of the camp did not bother to thoroughly check.

Father Maximilian had kept his word to Mary. He accepted both crowns: the white for purity and the red for martyrdom. Pope Paul VI beatified Maximilian Kolbe in 1970. Pope John Paul II made him a saint in 1981.

The Franciscan Friars of the Immaculate are a Franciscan reform begun at Frigento, Italy, in 1970. They follow the ideal and life of "Ray" Kolbe in their total consecration to the Immaculate Virgin.

# St. Thérèse of Lisieux

[TEAM #4]

Generations of Catholics have admired this young saint, calling her the “Little Flower”.

Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, a French Carmelite nun, was born on January 2, 1873. She is popularly known as “The Little Flower of Jesus” or simply, “The Little Flower”.

Thérèse has been a highly influential model of sanctity for Catholics and for others because of the “simplicity and practicality of her approach to the spiritual life”. Together with St. Francis of Assisi, she is one of the most popular saints in the history of the church. Pope Pius X called her “the greatest saint of modern times”.

Thérèse felt an early call to religious life, and overcoming various obstacles, in 1888 at the early age of 15, she became a nun and joined two of her elder sisters in cloistered Carmelite community of Lisieux, Normandy. After nine years as a Carmelite religious, she died of tuberculosis at the age of 24. Her feast day is on October 1.

The spirituality and message of St Thérèse of Lisieux became known to millions through the publication of her autobiography *Story of a Soul* a year after her death.

“For me prayer is an aspiration of the heart, it is a simple glance directed to heaven, it is a cry of gratitude and love in the midst of trial, as well as joy; finally, it is something great, supernatural which expands my soul and unites me to Jesus.” St Thérèse.

# St. Gemma

[TEAM #5]

St Gemma lived an extraordinary life as a Victim Soul for the conversion of sinners, and her many comments about the mercy and forgiveness of God, as found in her writings on this website. In fact the great dome on the Monestary Church of St Gemma Galgani in Lucca, Italy bears one of Gemma's remarks on the mercy of God- in giant letters encircling the vast interior of great Church dome it says- "I wish, oh Jesus, that my voice could reach to the ends of the world, to call all sinners and tell them to enter into Thy Heart!" And beneath the Church dome, inside the main altar, lies the venerable remains of St Gemma.

Below are St Gemma's sayings on the mercy and forgiveness of God, as taken from her writings:

"You see, my Jesus, that I have such great confidence in You that if I saw the gates of Hell open and I stood on the brink of the abyss, I should not despair. And even if I saw heaven and hell against me, still I would not despair of Your mercy, because I would put my faith in You. You are so compassionate, so merciful!"

"You are great, oh Jesus, but my soul--permit me to say it--my soul will enable Thee to appear even greater, because Your mercy will achieve such great victories in me."

"If you only saw how horrible my soul is! Jesus has made me see it... Oh, how much I ought to marvel at the infinite mercy of God! Yes, Jesus is indeed my Jesus! He is full of goodness to me, a miserable and most ungrateful sinner. He has wrought again the miracle of my conversion. Through the light that He has deigned to grant me, I have come to know of my baseness."

In the last days of her illness, to the nursing Sisters of St. Camillus who had asked her which was her preferred prayer, she answered with great feeling: -"My Jesus, mercy!"

"I am not seeking Thy Justice. I am imploring Thy Mercy. Then Jesus, go in search of that poor sinner; press him to Thy Heart and You will see that he will be converted. At least try it ... Listen, Jesus, You say that You have made many forcible attempts to convince him, but You have not yet called him 'son.' Try that now, and tell him that You are his Father and that he is Thy child. You will find that on hearing this sweet name of 'Father,' his hardened heart will soften. I know, Jesus," she said, "I know it, that he has offended Thee thus grievously. But I have done worse and, for all that, You have shown me Mercy. I know, I know, O Jesus, that he has made Thee weep. But now, Jesus-You must not think of his sins. You must think of the Blood You have shed. What immense Charity, o Jesus, have You not lavished on me! Use with my sinner, I implore of Thee, all those delicacies of Infinite Love that You have used toward me. Remember, Jesus, that I want his salvation. Triumph, triumph, I ask for him of You in Charity."

"My heart is always united to Jesus, who more and more consumes me. Oh my most sweet Jesus, I would wish to be all dissolved in the midst of the flames of Your Love. Oh, how can I correspond, my God, since You have given me so much? Who will help me in this? To Your Mercy alone I owe the little love that there is in my poor heart for Thee."

Writing to Father Germanus, Gemma states: "But can it be true, that Jesus is content with my soul? Oh, how often I blush and tremble at seeing myself so unclean in His presence! I have turned away when He called me. Oh, Father, do ask Jesus often to have mercy on my soul! Implore Him to pardon my sins. Tell Him that a thousand pains of body and soul will seem to me nothing if only I can make atonement for my faults. Oh my God, the chastisement will never be as terrible as I deserve. Punish me as Thou will, but take off the weight of so many sins, for this weight oppresses and crushes me. Woe to me if for one instant I were to lose sight of my faults and my iniquities! Oh, what disgust I feel for myself! Jesus dishonored by me! The goodwill that I seem to have is my only comfort in the midst of so many miseries."



"..I found myself in a few minutes before Jesus, together with Mother Giuseppa. Finding myself near such a saintly soul, I fully understood my wretchedness and my weakness, I knew my nothingness before God, and turning to her, Mother Giuseppa, I begged like this: "Oh chosen soul, you who take pleasure in your Jesus, being his bride, you have made him your heart's beloved; I turn to your mercy, that you may aid me with Jesus. Offer some prayers to him for me."

"See, my God, if you had bestowed all these graces, these gifts, these favors on a soul who in return would have offered You a treasure of virtues, so many benefits would not have remained unpaid. But in granting them to a soul like mine, through sheer mercy...."

"I am burning, Jesus. What happiness for me if I were entirely embraced with Your pure love! Oh Jesus, I implore Your mercy, but I do not ask for Your delights which I do not deserve at all. It would be sufficient, oh Jesus, to be nourished with Your heavenly bread."

"My guardian Angel has not left me for even a second; yet, how many omissions, how many faults even in his presence! My God, have mercy on me!...Here I am at Thursday. The usual disgust descends upon me; fear of losing my soul comes over me; the number of my sins and their enormity, all open up before me. What agitation! In these moments my guardian Angel suggested in my ear: "But God's mercy is infinite." I then calmed down."

"Lord, if you wish, you can save me; but the number of the sins I carry with me is great, and it is infinite. Remember, Oh Jesus, your mercy."

"Oh my God, if I could be certain even for a little while that I never offended You! Oh, I don't deny it; I am a sinner, but for this I do not want to despair because should I despair, I would be denying Your mercy. My Jesus I love You, but if I love You too little, let me love You more."

"...I know too well my unworthiness, but I also know Your mercy."

"He [speaking of her guardian Angel] taught me many times how to act in the presence of God; that is, to adore Him in His infinite goodness, His infinite majesty, His mercy and in all His attributes"

"...I found myself before Jesus but he was not alone. Standing beside him was a man with white hair and from his habit I knew that he was a Passionist. He had his hands joined and he was praying, praying fervently. As I looked at him Jesus said to me: "Daughter, do you know him?" I told him "No," as was true. "Look," he added, "that priest will be your director and it will be he who will recognize in you, miserable creature, the infinite work of My mercy."

One of the resolutions that she wrote in her Autobiography was: "Every time the clock strikes I will repeat three times: 'My Jesus, mercy!'"

"Paradise is waiting for us. If living for Jesus on earth makes us so happy, what must heaven be like where we shall see Him in all His infinite greatness, goodness and beauty? I hope for mercy from this Jesus, mercy for me and for all poor sinners. If I could, I would atone for all their sins and mine." -St Gemma Galgani.

# St. Faustina

[TEAM #6]

Saint Faustina was born Helena Kowalska in a small village west of Lodz, Poland on August 25, 1905. She was the third of ten children. In the 1930's, Sister Faustina received from the Lord a message of mercy that she was told to spread throughout the world. She was asked to become the apostle and secretary of God's mercy, a model of how to be merciful to others, and an instrument for reemphasizing God's plan of mercy for the world. Her entire life, in imitation of Christ's, was to be a sacrifice – a life lived for others.

Through her, the Lord Jesus communicates to the world the great message of God's mercy and reveals the pattern of Christian perfection based on trust in God and on the attitude of mercy toward one's neighbors.

On February 22, 1931, Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ appeared to this simple nun, bringing with Him a wonderful message of Mercy for all mankind. Saint Faustina tells us in her diary under this date:

“In the evening, when I was in my cell, I became aware of the Lord Jesus clothed in a white garment. One hand was raised in blessing, the other was touching the garment at the breast. From the opening of the garment at the breast there came forth two large rays, one red and the other pale. In silence I gazed intently at the Lord; my soul was overwhelmed with fear, but also with great joy. After a while Jesus said to me, ‘paint an image according to the pattern you see, with the inscription: Jesus, I trust in You.’”

# St. John Paul II

[TEAM #7]

Pope John Paul II considered sharing the message of Reconciliation and Divine Mercy his personal task from God. He lived with a burning desire that the message of God's merciful love would reach all the inhabitants of the earth and fill their hearts with hope.

Pope Saint John Paul II served as Pope from 1978 to 2005. As Pope he designated the second Sunday of Easter to be Divine Mercy Sunday in a surprise announcement at the canonization, on April 30, 2000, of Sister Faustina Kowalska. John Paul II significantly improved the Catholic Church's relations with world religions during his papacy, and he upheld the Church's teachings on such matters as artificial contraception and the ordination of women, but also supported the Church's Second Vatican Council and its reforms.

One of the most well-remembered moments of his pontificate was his intimate, one-on-one conversation in 1983 with Mehmet Ali Agca, who had attempted to assassinate him two years earlier. It was a holy moment in which he expressed gentle attention and forgiveness, acting as a true reflection of Christ's mercy. Pope John Paul lived the faith he preached—completely unafraid of the vulnerability in forgiveness—and became an example of mercy and humanity for the entire world.

In 1981, at the Shrine of Merciful Love in Italy, John Paul II stated:

“How much the world is in need of the mercy of God today! In every continent, from the depths of human suffering, a cry for mercy seems to rise. In those places where hatred and the thirst for revenge are overwhelming, where war brings suffering and the death of innocents, one needs the grace of mercy to pacify the minds and the hearts and make peace spring forth. In those places where there is less respect for life and human dignity, one needs the merciful love of God, in whose light we see the ineffable value of every single human being. Mercy is needed to ensure that every injustice may find its solution in the splendor of truth.”

On 19 December 2009, John Paul II was proclaimed Venerable by his successor Pope Benedict XVI and was beatified on May 1st, 2011, Divine Mercy Sunday. Saint Pope John Paul's voice for the Catholic Church has carried the tender and beautiful messages of ecumenism, forgiveness, and redemption, and has blessed the life of all the faithful.