

## Anicet Koplinski [Koplin] (1875-1941)



ften the end of a life time may reveal an overall meaning to that life. This is especially true for a man whom John Paul II, on his eighth papal visit to Poland, proclaimed 'blessed' in Warsaw on 13 June 1999. This man would have remained an 'unknown' had he not been raised to the honours of the altar. Now the events of his life shed enormous light upon a dark chapter of the history of the twentieth century. Also in human events, their conclusion can reveal who a person was and what that person had lived.

He was a Capuchin who had remained virtually unknown to the world until his beatification. Adalbert, as he was baptised, was born to a Polish-German couple in Preußisch-Friedland (today Debrzno) in the province of western Prussia (Westpreußen) in Germany. The city borders with Poland and had a strong Polish presence. The relationship between the few German Catholics in the area with the Poles was also strong, especially because of the faith they shared in common. They often participated in the same liturgies and shared in the in the same jobs. Adalbert, or simply known as Albert, was the youngest of twelve children. The family barely survived on the wage of their father who was a worker. The Capuchins were known in that time for their social work, which he experienced first hand in his youth. On 23 November 1893 he entered the Capuchin friary at Sigolsheim in Alsace and part of the Rhine-Westphalia Province. The friary was far from home since all the Capuchin friaries in Prussia had been suppressed. He received the name Anicet (meaning, "invincible").

He was ordained a priest on the Feast of the Assumption in 1900 to exercise his ministry first of all at Dieburg, and then for a long time in the Ruhr region (Werne, Sterkarde, Krefeld) to assist the Polish people. In fact he studied a little Polish at home and had improved it during his years of study, even taking advantage on one occasion of a holiday near his sister in Poland. His knowledge of Polish was very useful in his apostolate in the Ruhr, as was also his background in a family of workers. He could understand workers and they could understand him. His affective ties, however, did not diminish his love for Germany. though he was from a border region, he was also a patriot. At the outbreak of the First World War he composed poetry in favour of the war, poems which today seem embarrassing. Later he also put his poetic skills at the service of the poor who had become the main focus of his pastoral activity.

A fundamental turning point in the life of Fr. Anicet happened in 1918 at Krefeld when he was asked to be available for the organisation of the life of the Church and the Order in Warsaw. He accepted this challenge enthusiastically. After many years of tsarist dominion Poland had found her freedom. However the economic situation was disastrous. There were many poor people and families living in misery and not many were very rich. Fr. Anicet became a mediator between these two groups. Without asking anything for himself. Always in his poor habit and sandals he would be seen walking along the streets of Warsaw asking charity for the poor. What he managed to collect he placed in the deep pockets of his mantle: bread, sausage, fruit, vegetables, and sweets for the children. He often carried on his back heavy parcels and dragged along large suitcases full of the basic necessities. On 25 January 1928 he wrote to his provincial Br. Ignazio Ruppert: "The many poor and unemployed people constitute a particular task that often involves very burdensome work. Nearly every day I go out questing." Anicet was regarded as the "Saint Francis of Warsaw."

It would not be far from the truth to interpret his questing activity for the poor as a kind of sporting activity. Since his young days he exercised every day lifting weights. At midnight prayer, a tradition that every friar began in novitiate, either before the

prayer or afterwards, he used to exercise after returning to his room. His application to the weights endowed him with prodigious muscular strength, either for the amusement of his brothers and for the benefit of the poor or some other pastoral activity. He could lift tables and benches and used to show off this ability in the local fairs and then pass around the hat to collect for the poor. There is a story about a policeman who was violent towards his wife and children. Despite his repeated confessions he could not manage to amend his aggressive character. One day Fr. Anicet took him into the sacristy where he took him belt and lifted him above his head, and shouted to him, "Do you see what I can do to you? And what will God do to you if you continue to be so violent?" The lesson worked. The policeman was freed from his violence.

When Fr. Anicet was not doing his round for the poor, he often sat in the confessional of the Capuchin church in Warsaw. Each morning he began to hear confessions an hour before Mass and remained in the confessional for an hour after Mass. In the evening, after he returned from questing, he heard confessions for another hour. He carried out this activity more readily than that of preaching. Indeed, his superior asked him to preach only rarely because of Anicet's limits in speaking Polish. For the many priests who came to his confessional Anicet's brief admonitions in Latin were very effective. He was chosen as the confessor of the bishops of Gall and Gawlina. He was also asked by Cardinal Kakowski and by the Apostolic Nuntio Achille Ratti, the future Pius XI. He usually imposed an alms for the poor as a penance. During the winter he imposed the penance on the Cardinal to give a load of coal to a poor family.

Father Anicet took care of the wellbeing of the soul and body of others. From the rich he asked bread for the poor whom he asked to pray for the rich and for himself. Before God each is responsible for the other. It was very significant to see Army Officers and farmers, well to do ladies and poor widows, waiting together in line outside his confessional. The Capuchin had the same love for them all. If news came that someone was dying, he hurried to the bedside in order to comfort the person dying and bring the sacraments of Confession and Communion. If someone died with no one to care for them, Anicet took care of matters himself, even the burial. He often took part in the funeral rites and the procession to the cemetery and would pray the breviary or rosary along the way. It often happened that he was so immersed in God that he was unaware that he had gone past the cemetery gate while the cortège entered the graveyard without him.

Anicet Koplín or Koplinski was of German nationality. He did not conceal this, not even when Hitler's political activity had become unacceptable. When he was talking with his confreres, he often beat the table with his fists when speaking of the turn of political events in Germany. He had sensed and understood the anti-Christian spirit of National Socialism and its demonic view of the world. For Anicet pacts with this political current could not be countenanced. Having experienced since his youth the honesty and faith of the Polish people, he could not but take their part, even to the point of accepting the surname Koplinski in a spirit of radical solidarity. During the first week of the German occupation of Poland he stayed in the convent. However, he straight away occupied himself in the aid of his poor, and also those who had to flee because of Nazi violence. Using his knowledge of German, he obtain the necessary permission from the German Embassy to obtain food, clothing, shoes and medicines. Father Koplinski worked for the non-Catholic Christians and for the Jews, as witness by Archbishop Niemira.

For the Gestapo, the Capuchins, and Fra Koplinski in particular, were a thorn in the side. The first interrogation took place on Ascension day 1941. The Prussian Capuchin, fearless and frank as was his way, expressed his blunt view: "After what Hitler has done in Poland I am ashamed to be a German." Possible the Capuchin could have saved his life by appealing to his German citizenship. However, as far as we can

tell, he did not try this way out. This would have contradicted that frankness and spirit of sacrifice that distinguished him. On 28 June 1941, the day after the aerial attack on Warsaw, Anicet was arrested with twenty other brothers and shut in the prison of Pawiak. The reason given for the arrest was his having read anti-National Socialist flyers, and having expressed ideas against the new regime. Once arrested, their heads and beards were shaved. They were stripped of their religious habits, but were allowed to keep the breviary. The father guardian and brother Anicet were tortured to obtain forced confessions. However this method did not succeed in making them confess to instigating rebellion against the regime among the people. He remained faithful to his vocation as a religious and as a priest even when faced with threats and reprisals. His declaration to his interrogators attests to this, "I am a priest and wherever there are people I will exercise that priesthood: be those people Jews or Poles – especially if they are suffering or poor."

On 3 September 1941 they were all loaded into a cattle truck to be transported to Auschwitz where they received the sadly well-known, striped jacket and a prison number. Their human dignity was stripped of them. They were reduced to a number among thousands of other prisoners. Since he was already sixty six years old he was assigned to the Invalids block which was adjacent to the block for those destined for extermination. We can't be sure about the kinds of abuse and maltreatment that he must have endured during the five weeks that followed, but we can reconstruct something from the stories of survivors. We have the first hand testimony of his provincial and cell-mate, Brother Arcangelo. He says that "As soon as Father Anicet reached the entrance of the concentration camp, he was beaten because he could not keep up with the others. An SS dog also took hold of him. During the roll call he was put together with the elderly and those who could not work. He placed in the block near the one for those assigned for death. During this whole period of sufferings, Brother Anicet prayed and remained silent, continuously maintaining peace and silence."

This witness is enough to let us to intuit that the Capuchin friar, after often having celebrating the Via Crucis and helped others to carry their Cross behind Jesus, lived that tragic moment united with Jesus, as a his own painful way to Golgotha. The one, who had just a little earlier cried out to defend the poor and condemn the sinner, now kept silence and prayed. Before being taken to the gas chamber, he also said to a friend, "We must drink this chalice to the bottom."

On 16 October, after a staged trial by the jailers, they threw Br. Anicet into a pit with other prisoners and then threw quicklime onto them: a horrendous death since the caustic lime acts as a corrosive acid on live flesh, to the point of consuming bodies like fire.

After having lived poverty and being committed to the poor, Anicet Koplín met sister death in total poverty. Externally he had been stripped of everything, even his flesh. Within himself, however, he possessed a treasure that no one could strip from him: faith, dignity and loving attention to others. He died in the hope of the resurrection and in the faith that in his suffering and atrocious death helped reconcile divisions between Germany and Poland, Jews and Christians, Catholics and Protestants, poor and rich.

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