

Maria Teresa Kowalska of the Child Jesus (1902-1941)



In the list of 108 blessed martyrs of Nazism proclaimed on 13 June 1999, John Paul included the Capuchin Poor Clare Maria Teresa Kowalska. Born in 1902 she was baptised Mieczysława. The names and background of her parents are unknown. She received first Holy Communion in 1915 and Confirmation in 1920. Two years later, moved by socialist ideals, her father decided to emigrate to the Soviet Union with some members of the family. This decision also stemmed from his disappointment regarding the formidable growth and political influence of the Catholic Church in Poland. His courageous daughter, on the other hand, not only remained faithful to her land but also chose to enter the monastery of Capuchin Poor Clares in Przasnysz.

Her decision was the fruit of her pious and exemplary life, as is evident from her religious note book, a kind of personal chronicle of her life, which documents her membership in various confraternities and pious associations. At her investiture she received the name of Maria Teresa of the Child Jesus. On 26 June 1928 she professed her perpetual vows. Although she was of slight build, she was always attentive to her monastic sisters, and ready to carefully carry out whatever task was entrusted to her: porter, sacristan, librarian, novice mistress. As one sister tells, "Her way of doing things won the trust of everyone." The community elected her to their monastic council. In her notebook Sister Teresa wrote down her thoughts, her aims, and some of the special episodes of her daily life. We know from these pages that she chose the difficult, enclosed life of the Capuchin Poor Clares in order to serve God and to offer herself in expiation for the sins of her family that had allied itself with communism. Soon, she would have the opportunity to realise that wish in a radical way, but also for her monastic sisters.

On 2 April 1941, after the Germans had invaded Poland, the monastery of Przasnysz was occupied and the thirty six nuns arrested and sent to the concentration camp at Działdowo. Also interned in that camp were bishops and priests. Although the sisters were closed in a separate barracks, they were subjected to the same sufferings and inhuman deprivations as everyone else: lack of hygiene, little room to move and little living space and no fresh air. Add also to these torments hunger and thirst. After one month many of the sisters fell ill.

already in the monastery Sister Teresa had suffered tuberculosis and could not walk or stand. Extreme weakness, accompanied by a continuous lung haemorrhage, slowly reduced her. There were neither doctor nor medicine for her. Still, the young sister endured the sufferings patiently, praying both by herself and participating in the prayer of the others. Despite the countless privations, the sisters were fortunately able to maintain the recitation of the Breviary.

Sister Terasina's physical condition deteriorated. One day she said, "I will not leave here alive. I offer my life for the sisters so that they may return to the monastery." Sometimes she asked the Abbess, "Mother, will this last much longer? Will I die soon?" She died on the night of 25 July 1941. Her body was taken away, probably to be cremated.

Her death had a strong impact on the other sisters. They were convinced that Sister Maria Teresa had concluded her life in a holy way. They nurtured a particular veneration for her and entrusted her dying words to the chronicle of the monastery. In fact, following what she had predicted, the Germans released the sisters on 7 August 1941, two weeks after her death. They were allowed to leave the Dzialdowo camp and return to their families of origin. In 1945 all the sisters returned to the monastery in Przasnysz. That liberation and the return to the monastery were seen as a grace received by God through the intercession of Sister Teresa. Indeed, the fact was extraordinary since normally the Germans let no one leave a concentration camp. The promise she had when dying was fulfilled and God accepted her sacrifice.

The memory of the death of their sister in the camp never died in the monastery of Przasnysz, especially in the celebration of her memory each year on 25 July. However, under the communist regime it was not possible to make her known publicly or to publish anything about the life this martyr under Nazism. Only after the fall of communism towards the end of the twentieth century could the monastery make known the this second "little Teresa of Lisieux."

Her beatification and annual liturgical memorial are two important moments to recognise in her an example for one's own life. Now that she is enrolled among the blessed, Teresa Kowalska will be better known both in Poland and in the Franciscan Family. Her memory is celebrated on 28 July.

Translation based on the article by LEONHARD LEHMANN in *Sulle orme delle santi*, 2000, p. 113-118.