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St. Maximilian Kolbe is depicted in a stained-glass window at St. Josaphat Church in the Queens borough of New York City. (CNS photo/Gregory A. Shemitz)



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My dear friend Russell Contreras is the New Mexico-based justice and race reporter for Axios, a devout Catholic — and a troll.

We have long mocked each other on social media, mostly to amuse ourselves and befuddle our followers. I especially love to ridicule the Houston native's eternal love for his Astros; he responds with texts of photos of *La Santa Muerte*, the skeletal personification of death revered by many Mexicans as a folk saint and that Russell knows I despise to the point that I've already done one Hail Mary and a sign of the cross while writing this sentence.

That's what I was expecting last summer when we met at a diner in Bernalillo. I was in the middle of a weeklong road trip across the American Southwest for the Los Angeles Times, checking in with Latino voters during the 2024 election year. We caught up on life and jobs, and then Russell announced he had a gift.

I expected a *Santa Muerte* sticker. Instead, he reached into a bag and handed me what I first thought was a rosary but was actually a stone scapular.

On it was an illustration of a bespectacled man with a high forehead who kind of looked like me. Then I looked closer. He wore a friar's robe and one half of a striped jacket of a Holocaust concentration camp prisoner, complete with a triangle and inmate number on its chest. One arm held an open scroll. Surrounding this image was what looked like a crown of thorns, but I soon realized was barbed wire.

"Ever heard of St. Maximilian Kolbe?" Russell asked.

"I think I have," I replied. Was he the priest who died in Auschwitz for reasons I couldn't quite remember?

That was him, Russell said. "But that's just part of why I'm giving this to you. Maximilian Kolbe is the patron saint of journalists. You need his protection on your road trip and in your life."

I was touched by his gift but wanted to make sure he wasn't pulling my leg. So I went to Google, and Russell was right. I put on the Kolbe scapular, thanked Russell for his charity of a gift and lunch, and took off to my next assignment.

That night at my hotel room in Alamosa, Colorado, after a day of interviewing farmers from the bottom of the Land of Enchantment to the top, I went online to learn more about Kolbe. Heaven knows my profession needs divine intervention these days — but what could the Polish native teach us ink-stained wretches?

Kolbe's most famous act was his last. In 1941, the Pole volunteered to take the place of a fellow Auschwitz inmate and starve to death along with nine others after a camp escape. The Franciscan was a prisoner at the death camp for hiding hundreds of Jews at a friary he founded in Niepokalanów outside of Warsaw. Eyewitness accounts state that Kolbe led his fellow condemned in prayers as they slowly perished until the Nazis executed Kolbe by lethal injection to make way for more prisoners. Pope John Paul II named his countryman a saint in 1981, stating in a homily the following year that, "by laying down his life for a brother, [Kolbe] made himself like Christ."

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Such a sacrifice was soul-stirring. But I was also moved by his commitment to journalism. Spreading news was as much of a passion for Kolbe as the Word.

He started a Catholic magazine, *Rycerz Niepokalanej* (Knight of the Immaculata) in 1922 that still publishes to this day. Kolbe set up a radio station, created a Japanese-language newspaper in Nagasaki (where he founded a Franciscan monastery in the 1930s that remains standing) and ran a press in Niepokalanów that printed newspapers, magazines, books and other religious literature. Kolbe was such a print person that a 1951 biography shared an anecdote about a visiting Franciscan who scoffed that St. Francis wouldn't approve of Kolbe and his fellow friars spending so much money and time on their press.

"Why, he would roll back the sleeves of his habit," Kolbe replied, "he would start the machines top-speed and go to work as these good brothers do, taking this modern way of spreading the glory of God and His Immaculate Mother."

After days on the road and still days more to go, that story invigorated me. It was a reminder that I'm privileged to write for the Times (and NCR, for that matter) and

use that opportunity to be like Kolbe — work without tire to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable, to use that old journalism adage.

I wore the scapular Russell gave me throughout my trip along with my L.A. Times press badge. Along the way, I was able to buy a small statue of Kolbe that I gave to my editor and a prayer card I gave to our boss. Today, my scapular is safely tucked inside the plastic slip that carries my press badge, alongside a medallion of St. Peregrine, the patron saint of cancer whom I carry with me in honor of my late mother.

It's a subtle way to proclaim my Catholic faith and also a great conversation starter: my badge inevitably flips to reveal my mini-shrine, people notice another guy with glasses, and I'm able to retell Kolbe's story.

I continue to pray to the saint for protection in a role (metro columnist) where people are more angry with you than satisfied. I ask Kolbe to help out my profession in an era where traditional journalism is under attack more than ever, and my paper has offered buyouts as it continues to fight for a sustainable future.

But I also keep Kolbe close to my heart as a reminder that I'm not perfect — not just as a person, but as a reporter.

There's another famous saying in journalism: you're only as good as your last story. That's not exactly true. Write a couple of bad ones, and they'll haunt you forever.

When Kolbe's canonization was announced, reporters broke the news that he had written approvingly of the notorious anti-Semitic tract "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion" and published tired canards about Jewish conspiracies to take over Poland. Supporters at the time tried to elide these facts by pointing out his later years and noting that Kolbe's sentiments were how most Poles felt at the time. I feel such a stance evades responsibility. Kolbe's words were indefensible, and he never had the chance to own up to them — but should they sum up his life?

All reporters make mistakes or do stories that they're not proud of. I've written many controversial things; heck, I used to write a column called "¡Ask a Mexican!" that was hated by progressives and conservatives alike, depending on which week they read. But I also spent decades covering the Catholic Church sex abuse crisis in Orange County, and still tell the stories of local heroes and villains.

When I'm done with journalism — a day I hope doesn't come for decades — I'm hopeful history will see the forest for the trees in my career. Having Kolbe around my neck is a reminder to always do my best.

Pray for me and my fellow journalists, St. Maximilian Kolbe. And Russell: I cannot thank you enough for the thoughtful gift. Next time I'm in New Mexico, the green chili is on me.