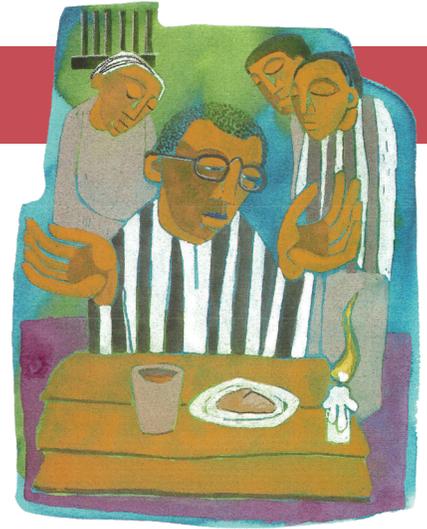


# The Soldier Who Had No Enemies



1

**Before you begin**, please read the introduction on the right to yourself.

2

With the help of your child, prepare the meeting space. Pull out your Bible, light some candles, and add any other decoration you'd like to make the space beautiful.

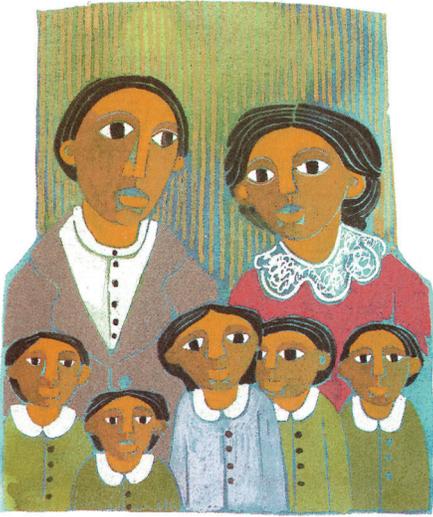
Then begin with a prayer.

Saint Maximilian Kolbe was martyred during World War II. This terrible war revealed much about how cruel humans can be, but Maximilian's life was a testament to the best humanity can be in spite of evil. His acceptance of others, his relentless faith, and his courageous actions were all clear signs of the Spirit of Christ in his life. Maximilian's special devotion to Mary, the mother of Jesus, led him to value fidelity and forgiveness. His ability to forgive others challenges us today!

3

**Getting started.** Discuss together: Did you ever have a very hard time forgiving someone else? How did it turn out? How do you feel about it now?

Have one family member read the text below out loud or take turns. Along the way, clarify anything your child might not understand.



When the twentieth century was new, a young boy named Rajmund (“Raymond” in English) Kolbe played with his four brothers in Poland. They were not wealthy, but they were happy. Their parents dyed beautiful colored cloth for clothes. This work did not earn them much money, but it kept everyone fed and warm.

When World War I ended, their village came under the rule of the Russians because Poland was divided among three other countries: Russia, Austria, and Prussia. Times were hard for the Polish people, but they kept their own traditions and faith.

Raymond was a very bright boy and did well in his studies. He shared his mother’s love for Mary, the mother of Jesus. Raymond knew that Mary also had to live simply under another nation’s control of her land. He admired how Mary stood by her son, Jesus, even until his death.

As Raymond grew, he knew he wanted to become a priest. He and his older brother Francis went to Austria to study with the Franciscan priests and brothers. Perhaps because he had seen so much of war and its effects on people, Raymond wanted to fight for freedom and justice. He even considered becoming a soldier. Instead he decided to be a “soldier of Mary,” fighting evil and teaching good. Raymond decided that having enemies was not the way to support the Plan or Reign of God.

As an ordained Franciscan priest, he took the name Maksymilian (Maximilian) Maria Kolbe. He continued to impress people with his intelligence and effort. When he returned to Poland, he and some of his Franciscan brothers began a writing and publishing company that grew and grew. A Polish prince even donated land to them. Soon they had formed a city called Niepokalanow (City of Mary). This center had over seven hundred brothers and workers.

Father Kolbe went to Japan and started another such program there. His health was not good, since he had caught tuberculosis when he was younger, but his spirit was strong and able. He learned much of the Japanese culture and loved the people he met there. In fact, Maximilian loved everyone and believed that there was good in all. “God’s Spirit is in all things and all people,” he often stated in many different ways.

When Maximilian returned to Poland he became the superior of his community. He continued living at Niepokalanow and writing his magazine, *The Knight of Mary Immaculate*. But the Nazis were now in charge of nearby Germany, and they soon invaded Poland. The Nazis took people away from their homes and families just because they were seen as different,

“undesirables.” Father Kolbe wrote against the Nazi ideas. He believed that just because some people were Jewish or Gypsy (traveling families) or somehow “different,” they were not less human.

Maximilian’s magazine angered the German leaders, and they arrested him. While he was in prison, he would often take care of other prisoners. He also was kind and loving to the German guards. He forgave them, for he believed they were children of the same God. When he was released from prison the first time, Father Kolbe even wrote to the mother of one of the guards to thank her for her son’s fair treatment of the prisoners.



Even though Maximilian did not hate those who were doing such evil, he did hate the sins they were committing. He knew that many of the Jews and others whom the Nazis had taken away were being killed. He heard stories of the concentration camps, awful prisons where people were killed in terrible ways. Father Kolbe did what he could to help fight against this, and he was arrested again for helping the Jews and the Polish people who were against the Nazis.

This time Maximilian was taken to one of the dreadful concentration camps, a place called Auschwitz. Now he had a new way to be a soldier of Mary. He secretly celebrated Mass with other Catholic prisoners. He heard their confessions, encouraging them to accept God’s forgiveness and to forgive the cruelty of others. He shared whatever he had with any of the other prisoners, no matter who they were.

In the end, he even shared his life. After one man had escaped from Auschwitz, the commander came to the cells where Father Kolbe and 600 other men were held. “Because of this one man, ten of you shall die. I will pick ten of you to be placed in a separate room and starved to death.” Then this commander walked heartlessly among the prisoners and pointed his finger at nine men. “Take him, and him, and him.” When he pointed at a tenth man, the man began to plead for his life.

“Please, commander, I have a wife. I have children. I do not want to leave them alone.”

At this, Maximilian left the line of men and approached the commander. “I want to ask you something, sir,” he said in German.

The cold guard turned and looked at the 57-year-old priest. He could have had him shot right then, but instead he answered, “What do you want?”

“I have no wife or children, and I am older than this man. I want to take his place in this punishment.”

“You? Who are you?” the commander snapped back.

“I am a Catholic priest,” Maximilian responded.

Many Polish priests and nuns, as well as Catholics in other work, had spoken and fought against the Nazis. The commander felt no problem with this substitution. “Request granted,” he grunted before turning quickly and walking away.

So it was that this soldier of Mary did die in battle, saving the life of another man, Franciszek Gajowniczek. This man told the tale of Father Kolbe after the war was over

and the Nazis had lost. Others also came forward to share their stories of Maximilian Kolbe, a man who forgave all his enemies and who loved all as brothers and sisters.

*If forgiveness is possible in these drastic events, how much more are we asked to forgive the people who hurt us? Remember that in the Our Father we promise to forgive “those who trespass against us.” The Holy Spirit reminds us that God has forgiven us first, so we, too, must forgive others. If we have love in our hearts rather than hate, respect rather than revenge, we are building the Reign of God right now.*

1

Now discuss the story with your child. Use the following or other questions:

1. What most struck you in the story? Why?
2. Even though you probably haven't had the chance to offer your life for someone else's, when have you had a chance to show bravery?
3. When is it hard for you to forgive? How do you feel after you have forgiven someone?

2

Have your child start their activity on the next page. Then continue to read below.

3

**Just for you:** We are called by the Spirit of God to forgive others.

It is not easy to forgive. We are much more likely to try to strike back or hold grudges. Forgiveness requires that we let go of our hurt. Such Christian forgiveness is a gift of the Holy Spirit. This type of love is heroic indeed.

# Changing to Happy Endings

**Can you suggest a new ending to either of these stories? How could forgiveness help these people?**

Susie is very angry. She texted Judi to ask her to a movie, and Judi said she was sick.

However, when Susie showed up at the theater, there sat Judi with another girl, Rita! "I'm never going to ask her again," Susie thought angrily. But really, Susie was sad enough to cry. Just then, Judi turned around and saw Susie. Judi was too embarrassed to say anything. "I bet she'll never speak to me again," Judi worried.

For the last two weeks at school, neither of them has spoken to the other, and Susie is always making fun of Rita.

Levon and Darrell have known each other since kindergarten. Levon is the better athlete, but both of them have always enjoyed playing basketball. When they had try-outs for the team this year, Darrell was afraid he wouldn't make the team. He asked Levon to ask the coach to let Darrell play. "He needs your talent," Darrell told Levon, "Just tell him you'll quit if I don't make the team. Then he'll have to let me on!"

Levon felt that really wasn't the right thing to do, but he didn't know how to tell Darrell what he really thought. When the team list was posted without Darrell's name on it, he came to Levon shouting, "I thought you weren't going to play without me!" Levon just walked away quietly. "And I thought you were my real friend," Levon murmured to himself. Now both avoid each other.

# The Freedom and Courage to Forgive

1

Have your child start their activity on the next page, and then continue to step 2.

2

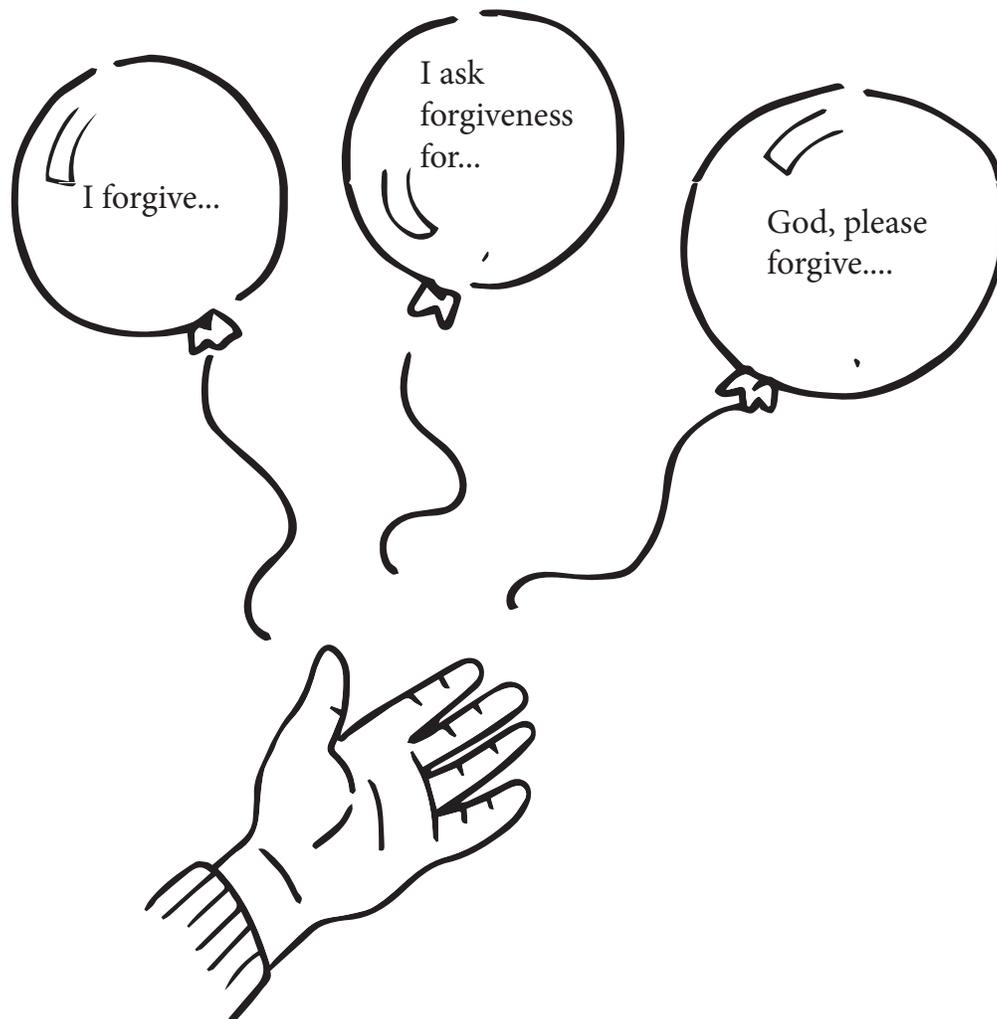
Go back to your circles of hurt one last time. Are there hurts or sins in one of those circles that are especially hard for you to forgive in yourself? In others? What are they? Why are these hard for you to forgive? Is it harder for you to forgive sin in yourself or in others? Why?

3

Follow the instructions below.

Just as the balloons in the drawing below are being released into the sky, so we, too, can ask God to help us release our anger, hurt or disappointment so we may truly forgive ourselves and others.

Take a separate piece of paper (you'll be ripping it up during the closing ritual) and write a letter to God. Ask God for the strength or gifts you need to be forgiving. It may also be helpful to tell God exactly what hurts you about this sin and how you feel about the one who hurt you. (God can take hearing our anger and pain. Remember Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane!) This letter will not be read by anyone else.

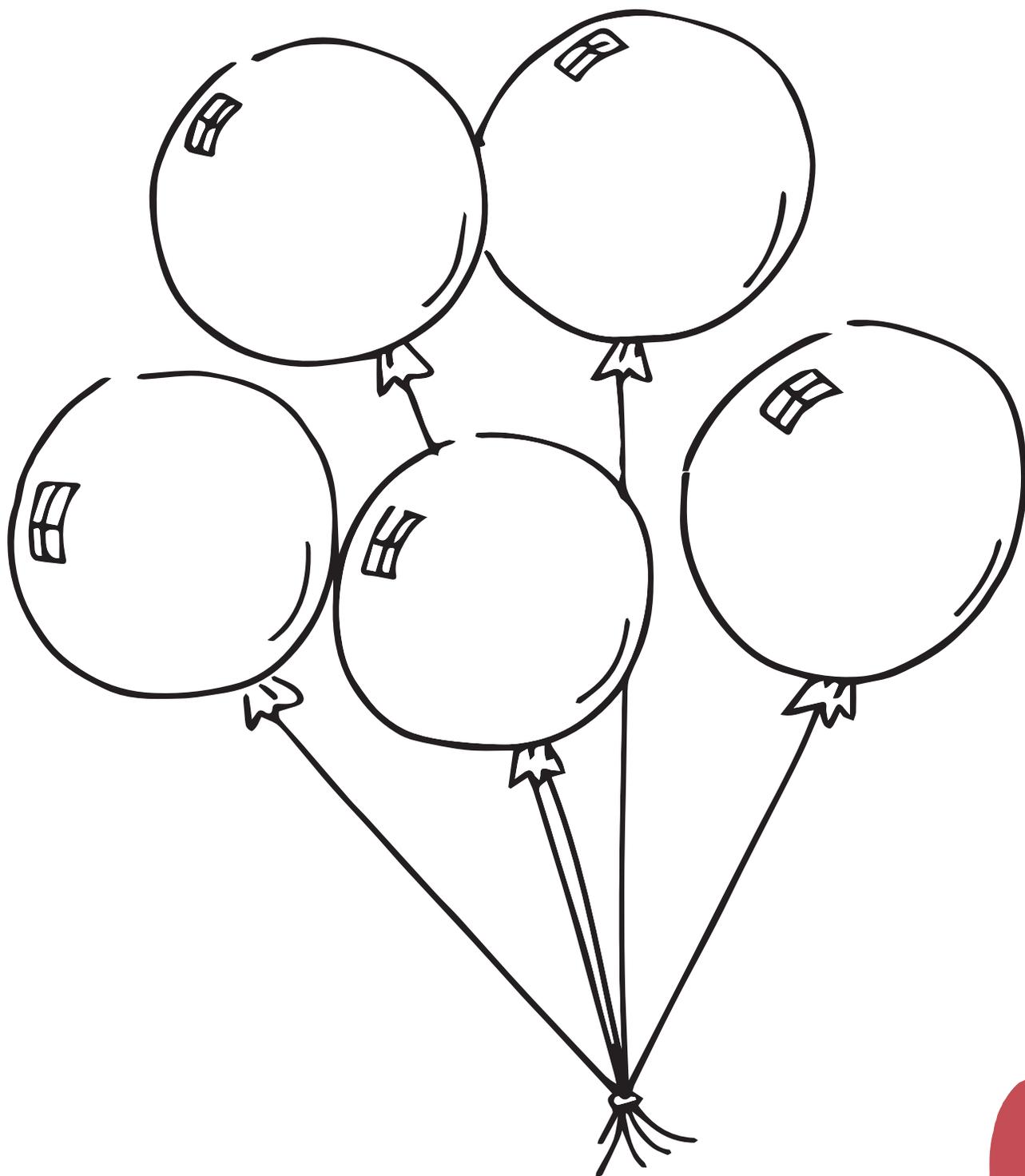


# Forgiving Means Letting it Go

We have already talked about asking for forgiveness. Saint Maximilian Kolbe teaches us that we must also be ready to forgive others.

Just as we can let go of helium balloons and watch them float upward through the sky, so we need to let go of our anger and hurt. When we do that, we are then ready to forgive others. To whom do we let them go? To God, of course!

In each of the balloons below, write a word or initials to represent some event or person you are ready to forgive. If you need more balloons, draw them on this page.



# Forgiveness in Conflict



1

Look up the history of some troubled spot in today's world (any country at war within itself or with another country).

What brought the two sides to this conflict? What could genuine forgiveness do?

## Closing Ritual

2

Forgiveness means letting go. Take the initials, names, and events you wrote down during your activity time and rip them up into little pieces. Ask God to help you let them go.

