

Good Friday in the Soviet Union

Good Friday Homily 2021

In 1940 an American Priest named Walter Cizek was given the opportunity to enter the Soviet Union as a missionary priest. In the late 1920s he had responded to a call of Pope Pius XI, asking for Jesuits to carry on the vision of St. Ignatius – to take the Gospel to the most challenging places in the world – like the Soviet Union at the outbreak of World War 2. In March 1940, having held his missionary eagerness in check for more than a decade, Fr Cizek finally managed to get into Russia in a boxcar of Polish laborers headed for a lumber camp.

He didn't mind the hard work and harsh conditions of that camp in the Ural Mountains. But he was frustrated and disillusioned to find no outlets for his priestly ministry. It was "almost a non-apostolate," he said, for even the Catholic workers feared Communist informers and refused to speak or hear of God. And so, as Cizek and a fellow Jesuit said their furtive Masses in the forest, he wondered: "Have all my work and sacrifices been for nothing? Should I give up?"

It was, he said, "the temptation faced by everyone who suddenly discovers that life is not what he expected it to be." But just as he was beginning to suspect that the situation might be God's will, he was arrested as a spy and sent to Moscow's dreaded Lubyanka Prison. He ended up spending five years there, in solitary confinement.

Initially, Fr. Cizek was not too worried. He was innocent, after all. And he had "a great deal of confidence" in his ability to stand firm against any interrogator. His strength, discipline, and habits of prayer certainly helped. But Lubyanka wore him down with its constant hunger and isolation and the all-night interrogations, with their mind games and agonizing afterthoughts. After a year—brutalized, drugged, threatened with death—Cizek did what he had been sure he would never do: He signed papers that gave the impression he had been spying for the Vatican. Afterward, burning with shame and guilt for being "nowhere near the man I thought I was," he finally faced the truth.

I had asked for God's help but had really believed in my ability to avoid evil and to meet every challenge. . . . I had been thanking God all the while that I was not like the rest of men. . . . I had relied almost completely on myself in this most critical test—and I had failed.

The interrogations continued, and Cizek fell into black despair. Terrified, he threw himself on God, pleading his utter helplessness. Then, in a moment of blinding light, he was able to see "the grace God had been offering me all my life."

I knew that I must abandon myself completely to the will of the Father and live from now on in this spirit of self-abandonment to God. And I did it. I can only describe the experience as a sense of "letting go," giving over totally my last effort or even any will to guide the reins of my own life. It is all too simply said, yet that one decision has affected every subsequent moment of my life. I have to call it a conversion. . . . It was at once a death and a resurrection.¹

¹ https://wau.org/archives/article/the_priest_who_died_three_times/

After 5 years in Lubyanka prison he was then sentenced to 15 years hard labour in Siberia, so that by the time he returned to the States in 1963 he had spent 23 years in Russia. Fr Walter lived another 21 years, dying at eighty in 1984.

Fr Ciszek's suffering was Jesus' invitation to die to truly and fully himself so that he really came to believe what St. Paul wrote in Galatians:

I have been crucified with Christ and the life I know life in the body I live by faith in the Son of God who died and gave himself for me.

Through the basest of human experiences Fr Ciszek came to realize that Jesus was inviting him to share in his Cross so that in his powerlessness he also understood these words of St. Paul:

²⁴ I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church²

That is ridiculous. Glutton for punishment. What is lacking in the sufferings of Jesus? The answer is nothing. His sacrifice is complete and whole, so how can Paul say he is making up for what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ. Sacrifice for sin is complete in Jesus. But St Paul wants us to understand that we can participate in the redemption of the world, Jesus extends to us a sliver of his cross. When we experience any kind of suffering, Jesus is extending to us a particle of his cross so that we can become co-workers with him. This is so we can become co-redeemers with Jesus, not because he needs it, but because he is extending that dignity and grace to us. When we feel most weak and powerless and have nothing else to give, even in that moment Jesus Christ can make you strong.

This is what Fr Ciszek came to realize when sitting day after day in solitary confinement. So, while we will probably not suffer in the way this American Priest had to for 23 years, we all are invited on this Good Friday to join our sufferings with Jesus. As we do this the Lord can teach us how to surrender the reigns of our life to Him.

I pray we can discover with Fr Ciszek what he writes on the last page of *He Leadeth Me*.

“What can ultimately trouble the soul that accepts every moment and every day as a gift from the hands of God and tries to do his will. St Paul says that if “God is for us, who can be against us?”. Nothing, not even death can separate us from God. Nothing can touch us that does not come from his hand. Is this too simple or are we just afraid really to believe to accept it fully and in every detail of our lives, so to yield ourselves up to it in total commitment. This is the ultimate question of faith, and each must answer it for him or herself in the quiet of their heart and the depths of their soul. But to answer it in the affirmative is to know a peace, to discover a meaning to life, that surpasses all understanding.

² [The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition](#). (1993). (Col 1:24). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

*This is the only secret I have come to know; it is not mine alone; Christ himself spoke of it, the saints have practiced it.*³

It is because of this Catholic understanding of the Cross that this Friday is declared Good. This priest, whose priesthood was joined to the High Priest Jesus, discovered this peace that does pass understanding because over many years he understood what it mean to say with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

*My Father, if it be possible, let this chalice pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.*⁴

³ He Leadeth Me Page 208

⁴ [The Holy Bible](#). (2006). (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, Mt 26:39). San Francisco: Ignatius Press.