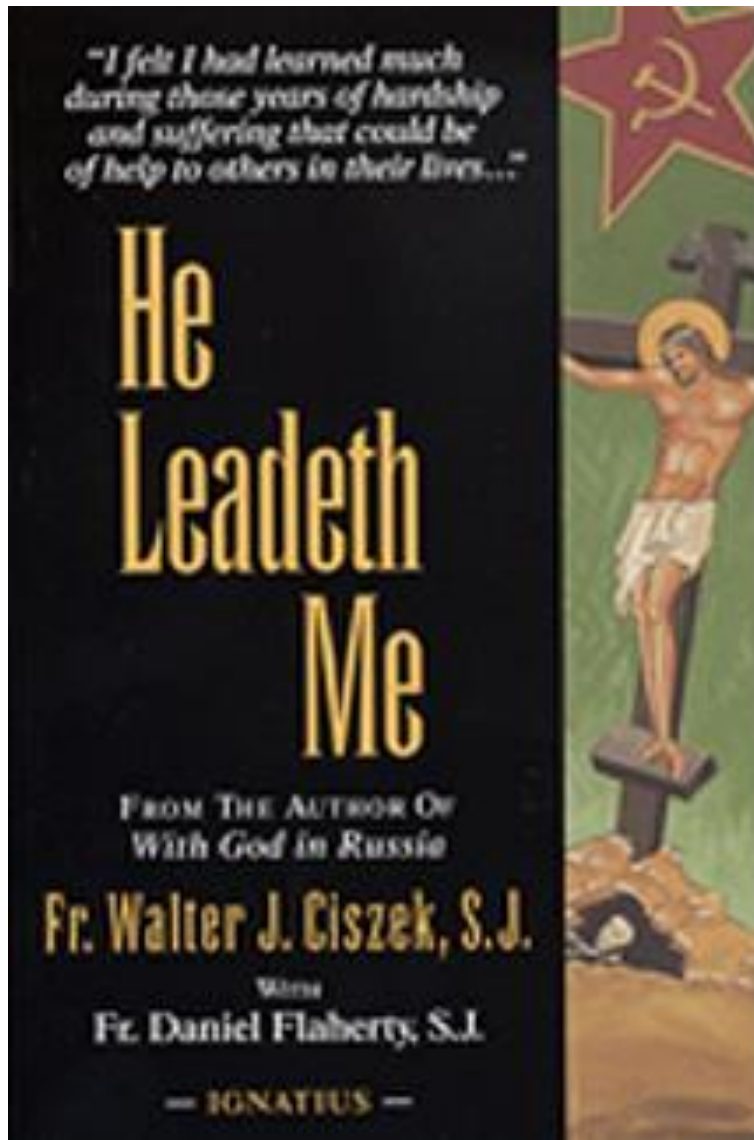


A Summary of He Leadeth Me by Fr. Walter J Cizek, S.J.



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About the Author

Fr. Walter J. Cizek is an American Jesuit who spent 23 years in Soviet prisons and Siberian labor camps, having been persecuted for his faith and imprisoned falsely. After being freed and returned to the United States he authored *With God in Russia* and *He Leadeth Me*.

General Summary

He Leadeth Me is the story of the American Jesuit Fr. Walter J. Cizek who was imprisoned in Russia for 23 years. During his persecution Fr. Walter learned how to live through an utter reliance on God and unquenchable love and hope. Fr. Cizek traveled to Russia as a missionary, and was subsequently falsely imprisoned as a “Vatican Spy” during World War II. He endured solitary confinement for many years, and then spent many more years in a gulag slave labor camp in Siberia, toiling under the worst of conditions. After his release from the gulags, he remained persecuted and subject to government punishment and interference as he lived in various places in Russia and tried to exercise his priestly ministry.

Prologue

In the prologue Fr. Cizek gives a brief summary of the story that he is about to embark upon, and thanks Fr. Daniel Flaherty, S.J, for helping him to write his feelings. The purpose of this book was not so much (as it was in *With God in Russia*) to tell the story of what happened to Fr. Cizek, but to explain what he learned from it and to help others grow in their faith through his experiences. In addition, Fr. Cizek extends thanks and gratitude to all those who helped him write and provided him the time and arrangements necessary to produce the book.

Albertyn

Fr. Cizek begins his story by relating the feelings that he encountered when the Red Army finally captured the town of Albertyn. Fr. Cizek worked as a priest at the Jesuit mission in Albertyn, a small Polish town. Upon the news that the Russians had captured the town, the mission went through a violent upheaval. Within a short span of time the Communists had banned the Oriental Mission, and the ministry of the priests was restricted solely to saying Mass on Sundays to the few older parishioners who dared to still attend. Those workers that insisted on expressing their faith frequently lost their jobs, priests were forbidden from actively engaging in ministry, and even the most faithful feared to practice their Catholicism openly.

As the priest that the faithful in Albertyn had come to rely upon, Fr. Cizek was faced with many disturbing questions. He himself was confused as to how to deal with the sudden upheaval in his life, and the sense of loss that overwhelmed them all when the world they were familiar with was torn from them. Fr. Cizek stresses repeatedly that it is precisely in these upheavals that we must realize that our ultimate hope is God, and nothing else. However, this word of consolation does not come as some sort of panacea for the situation, but finds its weight only in the lived reality of the tragic situation that all the people in Albertyn found themselves in. Unanswerable questions were asked of all the priests, such as whether or not the faithful were still obliged to attend Mass under persecution, and whether children should be allowed to attend Atheistic schools, et cetera.

Faced with the challenge of trying to minister to a body of persecuted Catholics, while himself being actively slandered and persecuted by the Red Army, Fr. Cizek repeatedly turned to the reality of Christ’s words in the Sermon on the Mount: “Do not be anxious about what you shall eat, or what you shall wear, or where you shall sleep, but seek first the kingdom of God and His justice.”

The Decision to Enter Russia

In the midst of the wartime persecutions that were raging through his mission, Fr. Cizek was approached by Father Makar to discuss two new developments. Father Makar was a former classmate of Fr. Cizek's in the Russicum (the school in Rome for missionaries to Russia, which has ultimately brought Fr. Cizek from America to Poland, after educating and ordaining him), and he had come to tell Fr. Cizek that the Bishop had decided to close the mission in Albertyn. In addition, Father Makar and another priest, Fr. Victor Nestrov, were going to travel with the Labor Unions and Labor Groups into Russia to minister secretly to their needs. Father Makar had come to ask Fr. Cizek to join them in this mission.

Fr. Cizek relates vividly the inner turmoil he went through in attempting to discern God's will for his life with this new opportunity. He personally desired, above all else, to go into Russia. However, his concerns for the faithful at Albertyn and his already manifested duties to minister to them pressured him into deciding not to go into Russia. Almost immediately, however, his prayer became difficult and his interior sense of joy and peace dissipated, and Fr. Cizek goes on to relate how he discovered that you could 'test' God's will by the fruits of your spirit. He knew that, although his flawed human reason had perfectly good arguments for staying behind, that God ultimately wished him to go to Russia, even against what seemed like perfect reasons to help those in Albertyn. To leave Albertyn was in some sense to abandon his parish, to leave behind Catholics who were being persecuted with only one priest to minister to them (as opposed to two), and to head off into an unknown and somewhat idealistic mission field.

Fr. Cizek relates his inner turmoil to the turmoil any person experiences at attempting to make a life-altering decision, especially in response to a vocation (a call from God). He had every reason to remain behind, and yet deep down he knew that once he had made a firm commitment to obey God he found peace only in the idea of traveling to Russia. With that acknowledgement, he agreed to go.

Russia

In this chapter, Fr. Cizek relates his experiences laboring in Teplaya-Gora, a lumber labor camp where he and Father Nestrov worked. Having entered Russia with ideas of a fantastic apostolate, they were quickly crushed by the realization that the oppression of religion was almost entirely total. The refugees refused to speak to them of religion in any sense, and they were unable to reveal themselves as Catholics, let alone as priests. They were even unable to catechize the children for fear that in their innocence they would repeat something and have the men arrested.

The constant pressure to begin an apostolate, and the seemingly total failure of the apostolate, wore on the two priests to the point that they began to question their calling to Russia at all. Life was not as they expected it to be, and they felt as though they were failing to fulfill God's will. Gradually, however, they began to realize their mistake.

The mistake was not that they should have remained in Poland instead of going into Russia, but in believing that they could find God's will for them in deep thought or abstract reasoning rather than the daily circumstances of their life. Fr. Cizek had been looking for a massive apostolate, when in fact God has called him to serve in the lumber camp at Teplaya-Gora, and if no one there wished to speak to him of religion it did not mean the failure of his vocation. God's will for anyone is, as Fr. Cizek puts it, the twenty-four hours He gives them each day. The truth is that God's will can be discovered precisely in the situations. Even in its simplicity it is easy to be distracted from our mission, but Fr. Cizek stresses repeatedly that God's will for us is not tied to what we *think* His will should be, or what we want His will to be, or what we thought it was, but what is actually happening in our lives at any given moment. To respond to God's call, then, is merely to respond in love to every situation that arises in life, no matter whether or not it fit into our perception of where God's will was taking us.

Arrest and Imprisonment

The Nazis attacked Russia on June 22nd, 1941, and that same day the Secret Police arrested Fr. Ciszek, Father Nestrov, and all of their roommates. Fr. Ciszek was arrested as a political prisoner, mainly for being a priest, and was put into a small cell completely crowded with other political prisoners. The situation was entirely inhuman, and the Secret Police showed not even the slightest interest in listening to any stories of innocence or appeals to ‘the system.’ Instead, each man was tempted, almost driven, by the inhuman conditions of the prison to become inhuman.

Fr. Ciszek himself, seeking consolation from the total helplessness and humiliation of the situation, revealed to the other prisoners that he was arrested for being a priest. Instead of receiving the sympathy he desired, the other prisoners despised him and looked down upon him because of his priesthood. The Soviet propaganda had apparently taken much affect, and as a result both the Secret Police and the prisoners treated Fr. Ciszek inhumanely. In this state of depression, Fr. Ciszek turned to God in prayer, and was given great insight into his situation.

Instead of sinking into depression because of this lack of love, Fr. Ciszek recognized that he had injected too much of his own selfish desires into the situation. Instead of attempting to console others, he sought consolation only for himself. Instead of working with the day-to-day grace and environment that God had put him in, he was attempting to ‘fight the system’ or give into it and become inhuman. The answer was neither to deny that the situation was one of much suffering and caused him pain, nor to totally give in to that pain, but to offer it up on behalf of the prisoners and to attempt to be a figure of Christ to them.

Fr. Ciszek realized in his imprisonment at Perm that God does not ask of him the impossible, and that it was not his responsibility to fix the entire situation. He merely had to work with what he was given, and respond to each human encounter precisely as Christ would. In that way he would be more than fulfilling his responsibilities, and in that way he would be perfectly imaging Jesus.

Lubianka

Fr. Ciszek’s time in Lubianka began immediately after the imprisonment at Perm. As a ‘Vatican Spy’ he was placed in solitary confinement for 5 years, most of which he spent alone and in silence. Lubianka was the prison where political prisoners went and never came out of, and as Fr. Ciszek puts it, “Men were broken there in body and spirit.” Fr. Ciszek, however, called Lubianka his ‘school of prayer,’ and began by structuring his day and giving some order to his life. Each day he would rise and say the Morning Offering, meditate for an hour, say Mass by heart (all the prayers), the Angelus at morning, noon, and night, make an examination of conscience at noon and at bedtime, and say three rosaries (one in Polish, one in Latin, and one in Russian) as a substitute for his breviary.

Fr. Ciszek speaks of his development of prayer, and how he went from praying for his own needs to those of the prisoners around him, and how he struggled with concentration even in the silence of Lubianka. His prayer was interrupted only by sessions of interrogations with the NKVD (what the KGB used to be called), and by his own distractions. He found that real prayer occurred when he had fully placed himself in the presence of God, and at that point words almost became superfluous. That type of prayer, however, did not come easily, and he learned that even in the solitary confinement of Lubianka the external forms of prayer were almost absolutely necessary. For example, Fr. Ciszek explains that while kneeling is not totally necessary to prayer, it is almost essential in order to maintain attention.

The Interrogations

In this chapter, Fr. Ciszek explains the horror of the interrogations that he went through at Lubianka. It seemed that the NKVD truly believed, as ridiculous as it sounded, that Fr. Ciszek was a ‘Vatican spy’ and interrogated at random intervals for very lengthy periods of time. The interrogators would always ask direct questions, then twist the answer he had given them and return it to him in a new form. Over time, his confidence and energy in correcting their purposeful misinterpretations grew weaker, and eventually he reached a state of almost complete brokenness.

Finally, he agreed to explain his story, without lying, and without trying to correct all their misinterpretations. When he finished he realized the mistake he had made. The one time he had given in would be used against him as a lever, over and over. The next day the ‘confession’ he had given was presented to him, and he had to sign all several hundred pages of it. Tormented by the realization that he could not sign these lies, and that not signing them would mean his death, Fr. Ciszek became completely overcome. When the interrogator noticed this, he questioned Fr. Ciszek, who weakly explained that he could not sign the lies. The interrogator exploded and threatened him with death, and in the shocking and overwhelmed state he was in the explosion of anger from the interrogator caused him to sign the papers.

When he had returned to his cell, Fr. Ciszek felt an immense guilt and shame at his failure. His prayer became a matter of reproaching himself, until finally he opened to God and realized that even in all of his prayer and interrogations he had been relying upon his own strength. He had sought God’s help, but had ultimately believed that he would be able to stand up to the interrogator on his own. Totally broken now, due to his failure, he realized that even the failure was a grace from God to get him to see that he required a complete and total dependence on God merely to survive and not sin. Bolstered by this new grace, and the realization (once again) that he must simply live every moment looking for God’s will for that present moment and not some plan that he had concocted himself, Fr. Ciszek felt totally at peace.

Four Years of Purgatory

After signing the false confession, Fr. Ciszek was informed that his punishment would be fifteen years at hard labor in Siberia. Before this, however, he had to undergo a period of ‘clarification.’ During this time he remained at Lubianka, and continued to go through interrogations. The interrogators pressured him to convert to Orthodoxy, to become married, to become a communist, to become a covert agent against the Vatican, any number of things. Fr. Ciszek at first despaired at the prospect of another four years in solitary confinement, and after passing through that period of despair once again turned to prayer “in fear and trembling.” He truly learned, in his prayer from the brink of despair, that he must abandon himself totally and completely to God. Every aspect of his life, not as some mental construct or pious thought, but in every moment and every lived second of his life he must totally abandon himself to God.

Understanding this, his interrogations became almost peaceful. He simply agreed to whatever the Russian interrogator said, and calmly went about his days in prayer and silence. Finally, when the Russian interrogator presented him with documents to sign asking him to become a spy against the Vatican, Fr. Ciszek merely refused, and was immediately rushed away for what seemed like execution. As Fr. Ciszek puts it: “He became violently angry and threatened me with immediate execution. I felt no fear at all. I think I smiled. I knew then I had won. When he called for the guards to lead me away – and I had no assurance but that they were leading me before a firing squad – I went with them as if they were so many ministers of grace. I felt his presence in the moment and knew it drew me toward a future of his design and purpose. I wished for nothing more.”

In Transit

He left Lubianka not to face death, but instead to begin his long trek into Siberia. The sudden shock of going from complete seclusion and silence in Lubianka into a world of gangster and convicts (many of whom were not political prisoners, as was he), was completely jarring. The meditative prayer he had developed in

Lubianka was immensely disturbed, and he had to relearn to live each moment as a grace from God. The palpable presence of evil in the criminals who would steal his clothing and food, kill or violently beat those who stood in their way, and do so with no remorse, was almost completely overwhelming. Fr. Cizek describes how he was tempted to descend to their level in the mean fight for survival, recalling the verse that “the children of this world are wiser than the children of light.”

Finally, however, Fr. Cizek began to see the humanity of the criminals, even as they were committing their heinous crimes, and saw that they too were merely seeking love and life. If they could do so with such violence and effort, then surely Fr. Cizek could make at least that much effort to remain holy and seek God, trusting that God would provide for his needs. Seeing that, Fr. Cizek came to see his temptations as just that – merely temptations, and he was able to acknowledge their presence and not give in to them. It was with this realization that his peace returned to some degree, and his ability to pray deeply and feel a total abandonment to God came with it.

The Body

Once in Siberia Fr. Cizek set about immediately at hard and gruesome labor. He was placed in the hold of a ship, and coal was poured down upon him. His job was to shovel the coal so that it would spread out evenly. If he failed to do so quickly enough, he would be covered and die. He must also meet a quota, and failure to meet the quota meant less food (which was already barely enough to survive). As part of the cruel game, if you overfilled your quota, you received ‘plus one’ or ‘plus two’ food rations. However, this new amount that you had overfilled your quota by became your new quota for the next day, and so the cycle never ended and you were ultimately worn out completely.

The first day he arrived he set about shoveling this coal for 15 straight hours, after 5 years of inactivity and rest in Lubianka. He felt as though he was close to death by the end of the day, and the next morning when he awoke the pain was so intense that it was an agony even to rise from his wooden bed. He was totally incapable of even marching down to the ship, nevertheless shoveling coal for 15 hours. As Fr. Cizek puts it: “It couldn’t be done. It was physically impossible. But I did it.”

This 15 year abuse of his body made Fr. Cizek come to appreciate the immense gift God has given humanity in their bodies. The verse “The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak,” became an ironic verse for Fr. Cizek, who began to love his body and recognize the immense gift it was. He comments that those who blame the body for sin and indulge in excessive physical mortifications have a complete misunderstanding, for sin is always rooted in the will, not the body. The ‘poor old body,’ as Fr. Cizek calls it, is the medium by which we live our lives and reach God. In one passage Fr. Cizek comments “that God, too, knows exactly how it feels to be cold, or tired, or hungry, or sore with pain, because He, too, has had a body. He has spent long hours, for years at a time, doing the routine and unspectacular work of a carpenter, has walked long days over dusty roads with tired feet, has curled his shoulders against the night air or a chill rain, has been without sleep while others slept, has been thirsty and hot and weary and ready to drop from exhaustion...” and yet continued to call the body good.

Work

Along with his realizations about the body during his trial in the Far North, Fr. Cizek began to realize the value of work. While the other prisoners would do their best to just barely make their quota and then conserve their energy, and even sabotage their work, Fr. Cizek always did his best to do the most work he could and in the best manner possible. He was too weak to do much other than fill his quota, but his consistent witness to the value of work was of immense value. Other prisoners would question him, and other Christians would even wonder whether his ‘cooperation’ with the Communists amounted to support.

Fr. Cizek explains, however, as he explained to them, that he realized that God's will for him in this moment was the work He had set before him, and as a result he needed to do his best at it. Even if it was the Communists ordering him to build a town somewhere in Siberia, it was ultimately another person that was going to live in that town and he was helping them by doing the best job he could.

Moreover, the work was valuable in and of itself, because it led him closer to God, and because God Himself had come to earth not merely as a man, but as a working man. Christ worked as carpenter for close to twenty years of His life, and as far as we know He set no 'carpentry fashion trends' or became rich and famous from His work. Work is not just a 'curse' inflicted on men as a punishment for sin; it is a share in God's creative act. As Fr. Cizek says: "By the way I went about my work, every day, every hour, to the best of my ability and the last ounce of my strength, I had to try to demonstrate again in the wind and snow and wilderness of Siberia what Christ had demonstrated through twenty years of carpentry at Nazareth: that work is not a curse but a gift of God, that the very same gift He gave to the first man, Adam, when He created him in His own image and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it as the steward of the Lord."

The Priesthood

Once in Siberia, Fr. Cizek was able for the first time since his imprisonment to function as a priest. In the prison camp, he was able to say Mass (ex-prisoners and other priests smuggled in the necessary bread and wine), baptize, hear confessions, comfort the sick, and minister to the dying. This was not permitted by the guards, of course, but given the sheer volume of men in the prison, Fr. Cizek was able to do these things secretly. In addition, he was not the only priest in the labor camp, and so as a result, he was even able to receive the Sacraments himself.

The prison camp was full of informers, however, and Fr. Cizek was known to be a priest, and so he consistently received the worst assignments and most grueling of tasks. Despite all of this, however, the other prisoners truly appreciated Fr. Cizek's consistent witness to the faith and his willingness to be there for anyone. Simply because they recognized Christ in him, as a priest, prisoners would flock to him in their little off time to have their confessions heard, hear Mass (when possible), or receive Holy Communion.

Being able to function as a priest once again was a true joy to Fr. Cizek, and he grew to appreciate his ordination as more than simply being able to say Mass or hear confessions, but instead as being a living witness of Christ even in the pain and suffering of the Far North.

The Apostolate

Fr. Cizek also discovered that it was in Siberia that he was finally able to do the mission he had first entered Russia to do: have an apostolate. He realized that his 'yes' to God in coming to Russia had been idealistic and filled with images of St. Xavier-style missionary activity, but now that he was in Siberia he realized his 'yes' had to be more like Christ's "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit," which occurred *after* his suffering and agony.

All through his suffering and trials in Lubyanka and in Siberia, Fr. Cizek realized that one simple truth kept him afloat. That truth was that sole purpose of man's life on earth is to do the will of God, which is present in every moment. If a man marries, it should be for the will of God. If he becomes a missionary, it should be for the will of God. If he endures suffering, imprisonment, labor camps and mistreatment, it should be for the will of God.

The only way to keep that simple truth constantly before his eyes was by recourse to prayer, and a childlike humility and faith before the Lord. This way of living in the presence of God's will, and doing even the most

menial or degrading of tasks in the realization that it could be a participation in the great work of salvation, made Fr. Cizek's apostolate flourish and gave meaning to his existence in Siberia.

The Meaning of the Mass

In this chapter, Fr. Cizek reflects on the immense importance and meaning of the Mass. Despite the danger involved, even of death, Fr. Cizek made it a point to say the Traditional Latin Mass every single day in the prison camp. The faithful prisoners and priests even respected the Mass enough to maintain the Eucharistic fast, which at that point was to not eat any meal from the night before Mass until you went to Mass. As it was often impossible to say Mass during the mornings, the starving and over-worked prisoners and priests would often fast until noon, *skipping a meal* that they desperately needed in order to receive the Eucharist. Frequently, because of the danger of too large of a crowd gathering, the prisoners who wished to receive the Eucharist could not attend Mass but would have to wait until the evening. They would fast then through breakfast, and lunch, in order to receive the Lord.

The effects of the grace received from these Masses was so palpable the Fr. Cizek exclaims that he could have suffered all of the persecutions he went through only in order for one Mass to be said in the frozen tundra of the Far North. Masses were said in any way possible in order not to be discovered, often lying down on beds, reclining, standing next to work equipment, said with a board for an altar, a tree stump, boxes, or a stone. The bread and wine was smuggled in by nuns, former prisoner priests, and local Siberian Catholics.

Sometimes the Masses were discovered, and at these points the Body and Blood of the Lord would often be desecrated by the guards. This constant fear of discovery and sacrilege led to the greatest of secrecy and efforts to hide the Mass, and yet the priests in the camp still continued to make it the goal of every day to find a way to say Mass.

Retreats

Life in the prison camps was endless and routine, and so Fr. Cizek developed an idea to lead retreats for the prisoner priests, and even some of the Catholic prisoners. These retreats were largely centered on the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, which Fr. Cizek remembered from his Jesuit training, and would place the priest and retreatant priest in great danger of discovery. They would spend an hour in the morning and a few hours in the evening for several days on the retreat, and these periods of spiritual reflection served as a way to destroy the monotony of slave labor and to bring the retreatant closer to God.

Fr. Cizek explained that many of the points of meditation were almost unnecessary, such as the 'presence of evil in the world.' Instead, Fr. Cizek emphasized to the priests that they had chosen to be Christ in the world, and that God had called them to imitate Christ's suffering in a special way by giving them this persecution. As a result, Christ would be there with his grace for them in each moment, and they had merely to open up and receive it. He emphasized to them the simple truth that had sustained him, that Christ was not present in some ideal world of the parish life, or of the 'persecutions in Rome' or of any other saint's story or normal priest's life. Christ was present here in this moment, precisely in the Far North, precisely in the swing of each pick-axe and in the saying of each forbidden Mass. He had placed them here not accidentally, or not as a punishment, but to serve His hidden purpose. They had merely to recognize that His purpose was here, even if they did not know what it was, and to live it out as best they could. In this way Fr. Cizek got the priests, and lay faithful, to see that their lives were not wasted or lost, but still precious in God's sight. God had not abandoned them, but instead was with them even in Siberia.

The Fear of Death

At one point there was a minor revolt in Fr. Ciszek's labor camp. As a result, he and the other prisoners of his barracks were dragged out of the camp to a local salt flat and lined up. They faced a firing squad, and in the seconds before they fired, Fr. Ciszek learned what it was like to face death. He recalls that his first thought was "Is this the end, Lord?" and then he began the Act of Contrition. He recalls, however, that the words were meaningless to him and he was simply repeating the Act of Contrition and an Act of Faith over and over without being able to focus on what he was saying.

Fr. Ciszek realized that the mix of the sudden animal instinct that takes over while you are afraid, and the suddenness with which he was faced with death contributed to his inability to pray at that moment, because the thought of death itself did not terrify him to the level that he experienced at that moment. Fr. Ciszek, during his many interrogations and under many threats of death, had already accepted the very real possibility that he would not leave the camp alive.

The faith that he led his life gave him all the hope he needed to overcome this ever-present fear, and the way in which he conducted himself was in stark contrast to the atheistic country in which he was a prisoner. Even in Soviet Russia, however, Fr. Ciszek noticed that the townsfolk would pause at the passing of a funeral, and several of them would even kneel and make the sign of the cross in reverence. Death forces itself upon people; it is the moment of contact with the eternal that no one can escape. Even with all of the atheistic propaganda, death still makes the eternal very present to those who survive, and to the man who is about to die.

Freedom

Suddenly, Fr. Ciszek was called into the NKVD offices and told that he would be released. His release was shocking not only in that it arrived three months early (after 14 years and 9 months of slave labor, and 5 years of solitary confinement), but that it arrived at all. It was a commonly accepted fact in the camps, even made known to Fr. Ciszek by the authorities, that priests were not released, even after their term ceased.

Within a few hours, however, Fr. Ciszek found himself marching out of the camp, and with mechanical precision he stopped and waited for the guards to lead him to his new work site. The guards laughed at him, and Fr. Ciszek learned that 9 out of 10 freed prisoners made the same mistake. His liberation was only partial, because he was given a *polenzie pasporta*, which limited him to movement in small towns in Siberia and ensured him constant trouble from the NKVD. Nevertheless, his new freedom was absolutely shocking and overwhelming. The gift of freedom that he had been given caused him to reflect on the nature of freedom, and to realize that in the deepest place all men are truly free. Each man is truly free to respond to God however he pleases in the situation in which God has placed him, and no one can take that from him. Beyond that freedom is not absolute, even in democracies, and it is impinged in many ways.

The Kingdom of God

Fr. Ciszek had now, not only that absolute freedom of faith, but the limited freedom to live in Siberia as he pleased, and using that freedom he found himself in a poverty stricken suburb of Norilsk. He lived for a brief time with two other priests, and then found work and lived on his own. Rapidly, Catholics flocked to his daily Masses and Confessions, and within the confines of Russian law, he began to preach and operate the ministry for which he originally came to Russia. He knew that even in doing that there was a risk he would be arrested and sent back to Lubyanka, but he endured that risk anyway in order to serve the Christians who ran the same risk to get to Mass.

This contrast between the Kingdom of the Soviet Union and the Kingdom of God made manifest to Fr. Ciszek once again that he lived to serve the Lord, and that service was in each moment of the day and not in some ideal plan that he concocted. There was the possibility of imprisonment and death (he had already endured one and the threat of the other), and yet God had called him to serve in this moment. With that abandonment of

faith, he continued to serve the Kingdom of God, first in his own life, and then in the lives of those around him.

Humility

For the Easter Vigil, Fr. Cizek drew such an enormous crowd to his small hut that it literally took him into the morning of Easter to distribute communion. The Vigil Mass ended at 3 AM (it had begun at 11:30), and he was still distributing communion at 9 AM on Easter Sunday to the shouts of “*Khristos voskres! Voistinu voskres!*” (Christ is risen! Indeed, He is risen!). Within a week he was summoned by the KGB and told to purchase a ticket to Krasnoyarsk (southern Siberia). With great effort he resisted the anger and hurt that came with being ejected from his ministry, and reminded himself that he was here only to serve God’s will.

The lesson he learned in humility from God’s plan for him was more than worth it. Fr. Cizek learned that humility is nothing other than recognition of the truth. It is merely recognizing your place before God, and having recognized his place before God, Fr. Cizek was able to face the humiliation of being forced from Norilsk and from his flock there. He learned to deal with the shocking transition from his semi-comfortable existence in Norilsk to this new limitation on his supposed freedom, and to do in a spirit of quiet submission to God. As Fr. Cizek says, “And now Christ, through the KGB, was calling me from Norilsk. Why should I doubt that He would provide somehow for those I was leaving behind – even as He had provided for them before I came? My first concern, instead, should be to follow wherever He led, to see His will always in the events of my life and follow it faithfully, without question or hesitation.”

Faith

Shockingly, upon his arrival in Krasnoyarsk, he was greeted by a persistent Catholic asking if he knew any priests. Their parish priest had recently died, and the Soviets were threatening to confiscate the Church structure itself since it served no purpose in their eyes without a priest. Fr. Cizek gradually revealed that he was a priest, and the parish insisted he become their pastor. They provided for his home, and even began to petition the City Council that the Church not be confiscated.

The faith demonstrated by the parishioners of his new little parish was so astonishing, especially in light of their normal human failings and problems, that Fr. Cizek was again humbled by his new experience. The people of his parish could not explain with any level of theological precision their faith, and many of them led less than saintly lives, but their faith was real and they truly followed after Christ. Fr. Cizek saw their faith, and all real faith, as a gift from God and the common bond that unites all of those people in the Mystical Body of Christ.

Fr. Cizek also learned that the key to Faith is prayer, because in prayer you must call to mind that you believe in this God you are speaking to. Even Jesus, Fr. Cizek points out, withdrew from His disciples to pray regularly, and prayer is equally essential to us. “For there is no difference between a man of faith and a man without faith (or of little faith) with respect to the routine experiences all of us undergo every moment of our lives, day in and day out, for weeks and months and years at a time.” It is only in the reception of those experiences that we find faith. We may see them either as a series of coincidences that are inflicted upon us, or as God’s will for our life and His way of showing us our purpose.

Humanity

The commotion that the parishioners raised in trying to retain their church inevitably attracted the KGB’s attention to Fr. Cizek, and his stay in Krasnoyarsk was cut short very rapidly. The KGB warned him that to continue to function as a priest would result in death or imprisonment, surely, and that he had to choose

between returning to Northern Siberia (Yeniseisk) or Southern Siberia (Abakan). Having experienced Northern Siberia quite enough, Fr. Cizek chose Abakan and moved there, immediately beginning to work in a garage and living with a former party member, and later an older woman whom he called his *Babushka* (grandmother).

The life he led in Abakan provided him enough privacy to say daily Mass and pray, and in his own quiet way to talk to the people of Abakan about God and to provide them an encounter with Christ. The ‘man-focused’ Soviet Union failed in so many respects (most particularly abortion), that there was always room for Fr. Cizek to talk to even the atheist generation about their experiences. In particular, he explained that even women who had been raised as atheists and trained to reject all religion would experience the guilt and shame and problems of an abortion they had had in the past, and would come to him for counseling.

This communist spirit, though riddled with intrinsic problems, was not without its spirit of comradeship and pride in the building up of the society, and even in these areas, Fr. Cizek could turn the conversations, little by little, from mere humanity to humanity before God. He never attempted to defend his faith or proselytize, but merely lived it out in his own life before those around him unstintingly.

Epilogue

Fr. Cizek closes his story by reiterating the one principle that helped him to get through all that he suffered: that to do God’s will is his sole purpose on earth, and that will is encountered in the daily life we lead and not in what we had wished we would have, or what we think we should have. His faith, he recognizes, is simple and almost naïve, but it is the faith that pulled him through those 26 years in Russia and eventually returned him to the Shenandoah Valley in Pennsylvania, after the American government exchanged some Russian spies for Fr. Cizek.

This truth of God’s will in our lives is shockingly simple, as all divine truths are, and so Fr. Cizek apologizes to those who were seeking some complex answer or magical formula for how he survived. “It means, for example, that every moment of our life has a purpose, that every action of ours, no matter how dull or routine or trivial it may seem in itself, has a dignity and a worth beyond human understanding. Nothing can touch us that does not come from His hand; nothing can trouble us because all things come from His hand. Is this too simple, or are we just afraid really to believe it, to accept it fully and in every detail of our lives, to yield ourselves up to it in total commitment? This is the ultimate question of faith...”