

“Yet Will I Fear No Ill, For Thou Art With Me.”

This March 19, 2010, the Solemnity of St. Joseph, will mark a little known but significant anniversary. For on this date 70 years ago in boxcar 89725 Fr. Walter Cizek SJ crossed the pre-war Polish border into Russia to begin one of the greatest spiritual odysseys of modern times. For twenty-three years he would labor as a priest not in a typical parochial setting, but instead in one of the most evil edifices that “enlightened modern man come-of-age” has ever devised: the Soviet GULAG. What Alexander Solzhenitsyn called the “sewer into which millions were flushed,” took more than twenty million lives (now considered a “conservative number” by recent research). Yet, into that Hell on earth, Fr. Cizek brought the radiance of Christ. Now he is the “Servant of God” Fr. Walter Cizek. In the Year of the Priest, we now take up his story.

Walter Cizek was born in 1904 in the mining town of Shenandoah, Pennsylvania to Polish immigrants. Even though coming from a devout family he soon acquired a reputation for rowdiness that would prompt his father to take him to the local police station and demand that they send him to reform school. You could imagine the look on his father’s face when, shortly after the aforementioned incident, he decided that he wanted to be a priest.

In September 1921, Walter enrolls in SS. Cyril and Methodius Seminary at Orchard Lake, Michigan and there strives not just to become a good priest, but a tough one. In his own words, *“And I had to be tough. I’d get up at four-thirty in the morning to run five miles around the lake on the seminary grounds, or go swimming in November when the lake was little better than frozen. I still couldn’t stand to think that anyone could do something I couldn’t do, so one year during Lent I ate nothing but bread and water for the forty days — another year I ate no meat at all for the whole year — just to see if I could do it.”* Little did he know then how this would prepare him for his future apostolate.

During 1928, he read a life of St. Stanislaus

Kostka SJ and something akin to what hit St. Paul on the road to Damascus hit him: he had to become a Jesuit. On September 7, 1928 he entered the Jesuit novitiate at Poughkeepsie, NY. During his novitiate Pope Pius XI issued a call for volunteers for a Russian mission. With Christianity virtually destroyed by the ravages of Communism, Pope Pius XI wanted priests ready and trained to enter Russia should a future opportunity present itself. He especially appealed to the Jesuits. Upon hearing the novice master read the Pope’s letter, Walter had another St. Paul experience: the Lord wanted him in Russia. Upon taking his religious vows one-year later, Walter immediately volunteered for the Russian mission and was accepted.

In 1934 he traveled to the Russicum seminary for his studies and on June 24, 1937 was ordained to the priesthood in the Byzantine Rite. Because of the impossibility of getting priests into Russia at that time, Fr. Walter was sent to the eastern Polish village of Albertin to care for the Eastern rite Catholics there. Then came World War II in which Soviet Russia seized eastern Poland. That in effect ended his parish work, but he and two other Jesuit priests came up with a bold idea to enter Russia. Acquiring genuine but false Polish identification papers they were hired as workers by a Russian lumber company located in the Ural Mountains. Posing as Polish refugee “Wladimir Lypinski” Fr. Walter, with Fr. Nestrov, crossed into Russia on the solemnity of St. Joseph. Humanly speaking what they were attempting seemed impossible, but Fr. Walter learned at this early stage whom to trust in.

“Enthusiasm and hope mingled with the sudden realization that I would now be cut off completely from the supports I had known — from my Jesuit superiors and colleagues, from my family, from the visible Church, from the power of the US Government to protect me...For a moment I thought with sorrow and regret about the possibility of never returning to Europe, to the United States, to Shenandoah. Yet the strong

realization rushed over me that I was not cut off from God, that he was with me, indeed that I was dependent only on him in a new and very real way." It would be this that would steer him through what lay ahead.

For 15 months they labored in the towns of Chusovoy and Teplaya-Gora. Unfortunately the third Jesuit priest was apprehended trying to cross the border, and under interrogation, informed on them. When Nazi Germany invaded on June 22, 1941, the NKVD (Soviet Secret Police) arrested them.

The next 5 years would be mainly spent at the infamous Lubianka prison. While prepared somewhat for ill treatment by the Communists, the reaction of his fellow prisoners nearly crushed him. *"I was in for a rude awakening. I was treated instead with contempt...I was stunned at the depth of feeling and prejudice against the Church that came spilling out...when it became known I was a priest. I was cursed at; I was shunned; I was looked down upon and despised was at a loss to understand it and furious at the added injustice of this stupid, blind prejudice. I was very nearly reduced to tears...Nobody would listen, very few in fact would even talk to me. In the words of Isaiah, I felt 'despised and the most abject of men.' To both prison officials and fellow prisoners alike, I was a thing of no value; I was worthless...There was no one to turn to, no one to talk to, no one from whom I could seek advice or sympathetic understanding, no one to offer me any consolation."*

Convicted of being a "Vatican spy," he was sent to the city of Norlisk (north of the Arctic Circle) to labor there for 15 years. Backbreaking work for 12 hours a day, wretched housing conditions, poor food (and little of it) along with a fierce climate claimed many a life. Yet those horrid conditions became the means by which Our Lord taught Fr. Walter to trust in him. With many Poles and Ukrainians already there, a parish was in fact awaiting him. Since other priests and ministers were imprisoned there, ecumenism got a head start as all worked together wonderfully to care for their fellow prisoners.



Servant of God
Fr. Walter Ciszek SJ

April 22, 1955 Fr. Ciszek is released and ordered to live in the city of Norlisk. He maintained such an active ministry among the people that the secret police (now the KGB) would eventually expel him from the city. He spent his remaining years in Russia in the city of Abakan working in the municipal garage as a mechanic. In October 1963 Fr. Walter was exchanged for a Russian spy caught in the US. He would spend his remaining years at the John XXIII Center in Fordham University. On December 8, 1984 he went to his heavenly homeland.

While his story makes for good reading, the real significance lies in the spiritual truths that his life teaches us. Most importantly, the power of prayer: that's what got him through. As he says, *"The power of prayer reaches beyond all efforts of man seeking to find meaning in life. This power is available to all; it can transform mans weaknesses, limitations and his sufferings."* If he wants us to remember anything from his life it is this. Never doubt the power of prayer no matter how desperate our circumstances might be. Through prayer you can find Christ even in your deepest despair as he found Christ in the hell hole of the Gulag. Also everything is in God's hands and we are called to trust in him completely no matter how bad things may presently seem, for us personally, for our country, and our Church. We will let Fr. Walter finish up.

"Across the threshold I had been afraid to cross, things suddenly seemed so very simple. There was but a single vision, God, who was all in all; there was but one will that directed all things, God's will. I had only to see it, to discern it in every circumstance in which I found myself, and let myself be ruled by it. God is in all things, sustains all things, directs all things. To discern this in every situation and circumstance, to see His will in all things, was to accept each circumstance and situation and let oneself be borne along in perfect confidence and trust. Nothing could separate me from Him, because He was in all things. No danger could threaten me, no fear could shake me, except the fear of

losing sight of Him. The future, hidden as it was, was hidden in His will and therefore acceptable to me no matter what it might bring. The past, with all its failures, was not forgotten; it remained to remind me of the weakness of human nature and the folly of putting any faith in self. But it no longer depressed me. I looked no longer to self to guide me, relied on it no longer in any

way, so it could not again fail me. By renouncing, finally and completely, all control of my life and future destiny, I was relieved as a consequence of all responsibility. I was freed thereby from anxiety and worry, from every tension, and could float serenely upon the tide of God's sustaining providence in perfect peace of soul." ✠