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# WITH GOD in RUSSIA

The Inspiring Classic Account of a  
Catholic Priest's Twenty-Three Years in  
Soviet Prisons and Labor Camps

**WALTER J. CISZEK, SJ**

*with*

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## CHAPTER 1: THE BEGINNINGS

1. About his twenty-three years in Russia—fifteen of which he spent in prison or in prison camps—Walter J. Ciszek, SJ, writes that people would ask him, “How did you manage to survive?” What do you think about his answer: “Divine Providence” (p. 7)? What impact has God’s Providence had on your life?
2. What stands out to you about the sort of man Father Ciszek was before he went to Russia? How did he end up in Russia?
3. “If it was from my father that I inherited my toughness, it was from my mother that I received my religious training” (p. 9). How would you describe the influence your parents had on the person you have become?
4. Father Ciszek writes, “I knew I had come to the end of a long search. I was convinced that God had at last sought me out and was telling me the answer to my long desire and the reason for all my struggles” (p. 14). Have you ever had a moment of clarity like this with regard to your own vocation? If so, describe it.
5. Why do you think Father Ciszek was so passionate about the mission in Russia (p. 17)? Have you ever been this passionate about something? Why or why not?

6. In Russia, religion was seen as “the ‘opium of the weak’” (p. 40). How might Father Cizek, a priest, have felt in such a context? Have you ever been in a context in which religion or spirituality were seen in this way? If so, how did it make you feel?
7. “In effect, our work had to be our prayer” (p. 41). How can prayer be work?
8. “[Prayer] reminded me of my reasons for being here, of my resolve, no matter what the consequences, to do whatever I did only for God. He would sustain me. This thought—that no matter how lonely I was, I was never really alone—gave me courage again now” (p. 57). Do you trust that God will sustain you through times of trial? Why or why not? Where have you seen examples of God sustaining you?

## CHAPTER 2: MOSCOW PRISON YEARS

1. “At last, I took refuge once more in the thought of God’s Providence. I dwelt on the idea of His protection—and I fell asleep” (p. 67). Father Cizek speaks often about God’s Providence. How often do you speak (or think) about this? Where have you seen God’s protection?
2. About his time in his cell in Lubyanka, Father Cizek writes, “After breakfast, I would say Mass by heart—that is, I would say all the prayers, for of course I couldn’t

- actually celebrate the Holy Sacrifice. I said the Angelus morning, noon, and night as the Kremlin clock chimed the hours. Before dinner, I would make my noon *examen* (examination of conscience); before going to bed at night I'd make the evening *examen* and points for the morning meditation, following St. Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises*" (p. 71). If you were in his situation, what hymns or prayers would you be able to recite by memory? How do you think your spiritual practice might sustain you in dire circumstances?
3. Can you imagine growing up in a world in which you would "hear nothing whatsoever of God" (p. 107)? What would be the influence of that on a generation of people? What would be the influence of that on you personally?
  4. "In the quiet period after lunch, I talked to the sick from time to time, trying to encourage them as much as I could. But there wasn't much anyone could do. I could—and did—give many of them absolution, and I'd sit close alongside them sometimes, whispering the prayers for the dying. I only hope it consoled them as much as it did me to be able to act as a priest again" (p. 125). Why was Father Cizek so encouraged by being able to care for his fellow prisoners in this way?
  5. How does humor help people cope with dire circumstances (p. 127)? How and why did humor sustain Father Cizek during his years in prison?

6. “Religion, prayer, and love of God do not change reality, but they give it a new meaning” (p. 134). This is a striking phrase. Have you ever experienced this dynamic? In your mind, how, exactly, do these things give reality “a new meaning”?

### CHAPTER 3: IN THE PRISON CAMPS OF NORILSK

1. “As I sat there drinking in the fresh air, another prisoner crept up to me with my shoe. He winked at me and muttered, ‘Tie it tighter next time,’ then slipped back to his own group. He had braved a reprimand from the guards for his effort, and I was touched” (p. 156). How much would this moment of kindness have meant to Father Cizek? What does it say to you about small acts of kindness? When has a small kindness helped you?
2. After years of waiting and anticipation, what must it have felt like for Father Cizek to finally arrive at the prison camp? What emotions did it stir up in him?
3. “The first thing to do was to look around for friends. It was impossible to be a loner in the prison camps; a man either had friends to keep him going, or he didn’t survive” (p. 170). What is it about friendship that helps so much with survival? Do you see friendship as essential to your own “survival”?

4. “They made the Mass wine for him out of raisins they had stolen on the docks, the altar breads from flour ‘appropriated’ in the kitchen. My chalice that morning was a whiskey glass, the paten to hold the host was a gold disc from a pocket watch. But my joy at being able to celebrate Mass again cannot be described” (p. 179). What do we learn about Father Cizek in this moment?
5. “My case was peculiar only in that it was a favor done to me because I was an American. That was often the case in the camps; the magic word ‘America’ was like a charm which held listeners spellbound for hours and made friends of total strangers” (p. 186). Why do you think Father Cizek held privileged status in a Russian prison camp because of his American citizenship?
6. “All in all, we had a thriving parish,” writes Father Cizek (p. 208). How could he say this, since he was living in a brutal prison camp at the time? What made his parish a thriving one? What does this say to you about the church?
7. About his moment of release after fifteen years in various prison camps, Father Cizek writes, “By 11:30, it was all over and I walked out the main gate of the camp for the last time. . . . I was so self-conscious, I didn’t know how to walk like a free man. My arms, dangling at my sides rather than folded behind my back, felt strange. I took a long look at the camp, almost as if I’d have to tear myself away, then put my hands in my pockets and

walked toward Kayerkhan” (pp. 275–276). As much as you can, put yourself in his shoes for this moment. What would this have meant? What might it have felt like?

#### CHAPTER 4: A FREE MAN, RESTRICTED

1. During his time in Norilsk, Father Cizek interacted with a woman named Ninja. What was it about her that so moved him?
2. “They ended our little chat with a strong warning to me to cease and desist my religious activities. ‘We’re not going to warn you any more,’ they said, ‘but you keep it up, and we’ll take whatever measures we feel we must’” (p. 299). How did Father Cizek respond to this threat from the KGB? How might you have responded?
3. “My sisters wrote to tell me they had contacted the State Department and that the American Embassy in Moscow would make efforts to get me out of Russia. . . . I felt I was destined to spend my life doing what I could for my ‘flock’ here in Russia” (p. 300). Why did Father Cizek respond this way to this news about possibly leaving Russia? What compelled him to stay in a country where he had been treated so terribly?
4. How was Father Cizek both “free” and “restricted” (as the chapter is titled) during his time in Norilsk? Provide examples of each.

5. “I thought again of the people I was leaving behind, saddened by the thought that I could do nothing for them any longer but commend them to God. For myself, I had no fear. I put all my trust and my confidence in His divine will. As we headed out into the snow-covered countryside, I repeated over and over again: ‘Thy will be done’” (p. 310). In your mind, what is God’s “will”? How do you personally make sense of the impact that God’s will has on your life?

## CHAPTER 5: MY RETURN HOME

1. Father Cizek spent so much of his time in Russia not knowing what would happen to him (p. 372). How did this affect him? How do you think such uncertainty would have affected you?
2. “‘Yes,’ he answered, ‘you are an American citizen again.’ ‘It’s all a fairy tale,’ I mumbled. ‘Yes, it’s a fairy tale, but a fine fairy tale,’ smiled Mr. Kirk, ‘and it’s true.’ It was too sudden. All at once I felt free and loose; it was as if a great weight had suddenly been lifted and the bones in my spine had sprung into shape like elastic. I felt like I ought to sing” (p. 381). What strikes you about how Father Cizek describes this moment?
3. “Suddenly, the plane gathered speed. I blessed myself, then turned to the window as we took off. The plane



swung up in a big circle; there were the spires of the Kremlin in the distance! Slowly, carefully, I made the sign of the cross over the land I was leaving” (p. 382). Why do you think he does this? How could he have done this after so much suffering? What does it say to you?

### FINAL QUESTIONS

1. How was your experience of reading Father Cizek’s story? What parts stood out to you the most?
2. What did you learn about Russia? About life in prisons or labor camps? About Catholicism? About perseverance? About God’s Providence and will?
3. What does it say to you about suffering?
4. Of all the book titles he could’ve chosen, why do you think Father Cizek decided on *With God in Russia*? How did the title frame your engagement with his story?
5. How did this book challenge you? How did it inspire you? What difference will reading it make in your life moving forward?