

I think I have mentioned Fr. Walter Cizek in a homily sometime in the past. He is one of my heroes. For those who haven't heard of him, Fr. Cizek was an American Jesuit priest who was assigned to eastern Poland just before World War II. In 1940 the Russians overran his part of the country and eventually Cizek was arrested by the Soviets as a Vatican spy. He spent five years in the horrible Lubyanka Prison in Moscow being interrogated by the KGB. He was then sentenced to the slave-labor camps of the Gulag. He spent the next 15 years in Siberia trying to survive day by day. Eventually in 1963 Cizek was exchanged for two Soviet spies and was allowed to return to America. He died in 1984 and his cause for canonization is under consideration.

Fr. Cizek wrote two books: With God in Russia, the story of his time in the Soviet Union, and He Leadeth Me, a description of the spiritual lessons Cizek's learned while in the Gulag. I recommend both. I've been re-reading He Leadeth Me, and one thing that stood out for

me this time is Fr. Cizek's thoughts on the mass, the Catholic faith, and how he experienced it in the camps.

For an American priest in 2020 Cizek's love and sacrifice for the mass is instructive. We have it so easy. The mass is so available – even now – compared to the situation in atheistic Russia's concentration camps. Cizek said, "Those who have never been deprived of . . . mass do not really appreciate what a treasure the Mass is." The prisoners would have wine smuggled into the prisons. They would save small crusts of bread. The priests-prisoners would secretly and hurriedly offer mass during lunch time at the work site or in the early morning in the barracks before anyone else was up. Cizek writes, "In some ways we led a catacomb existence . . . We would be severely punished if we were discovered saying Mass, and there were always informers. But the Mass to us was always worth the danger and the sacrifice; we treasured it, we looked forward to it, we would do almost anything in order to say or attend Mass."

The Catholic laymen in the camps were an inspiration to Cizek. They would fast all day – while almost starving -- in order to receive communion at mass. He wrote, “‘He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood shall have life and have it more abundantly.’ These men, with simple and direct faith, grasped this truth and believed in it. They could not explain it as a theologian might, but they accepted it and lived by it and were willing to make voluntary sacrifices even in a life of almost total deprivation, in order to receive this bread of life.”

What about us? This has been a difficult time for us. We have also experienced obstacles to living our faith – maybe not as serious as a Soviet concentration camp – but serious, nonetheless. But this is the time God has called us to live in. When things get tough the world needs saints. And we become saints through perseverance. We’re being tested just as Fr. Cizek was, just as the gentile woman was.

“She said, ‘Please, Lord, for even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their masters.’ Then Jesus said to her in reply, ‘O

woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” When the woman was denied, her faith and determination grew. That’s sometimes how it is. Faith grows in the middle of hardship and testing. Certainly, her faith was tested, but she kept praying to Jesus. She realized, “I can’t leave. Jesus is the only hope for my daughter. I have no place else to go.” And look at Fr. Cizek. Again, through difficulties and hardships he came to realize what really mattered. Being deprived of the mass only made him long for it more.

We are also going through a time of purification and testing of our faith. The Lord is allowing obstacles. How badly do we want Him? Will we persevere or drift away? Sometimes faith doesn’t grow in the face of difficulties. Sometimes it fails and dies. So, don’t give up, don’t give in. Keep turning back to Jesus. He is the source of abundant life.

Now, I want to be clear. If you’re vulnerable, or live with someone who is, then don’t come to mass if you feel it isn’t safe. You are dispensed from Sunday obligation. But I do want to say to everyone,

despite the current limitations, we are still called to practice the faith in the best way we can.

Here I want to come back to Fr. Cizek and his fellow Catholic prisoners in the Gulag. They were eager for whatever they could get from Jesus, the scraps. The mass in the prison camps wasn't celebrated with any outward splendor; no vestments, chalices, no music – just the basics of the Mass – and Jesus' Body and Blood. But still they came. So, what are our reasons for losing fervor now? What would Cizek and his fellow Catholic prisoners think of those reasons?

Some people are predicting that a third of Americans won't return to church after the pandemic. This is a decisive moment for us. Are we willing to struggle to hold on to the faith, because that's what it will take? We must not get out of the habit of worshipping God. That is a great danger of the coronavirus time to us as a Church and people.

The gentile woman was eager for anything from Jesus – the scraps of food falling on the floor. But the thing is, when we are hungry for the

scraps – Jesus gives us the banquet. That faithful woman didn't leave with scraps, she received the power of Jesus in its fullness. That is what Jesus still offers us, too, in this beautiful sacrament in this strange time. "I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever." That was true for the Apostles, it was true in the Gulag, and it is true today. The Eucharist is the greatest banquet – the feast nobody deserves, but that is offered to all with the faith to hunger for it.