

excerpts

## *He Leadeth Me*

by Walter J. Ciszek, S.J.

from the chapter titled, “Retreats”

pp. 138-139 \*

[...] I had little need to speak much of the power of evil to these prisoner-priests.<sup>†</sup> It was tangible. It was all about us. That there was a force of evil loose in the world, doing battle for the minds of men, was as realistic as the barbed wire that fenced us in and the propaganda that bombarded us daily. So this was their battlefield, this was where Christ in his providence had seen fit to place them, this was where they must labor and suffer and perhaps die. Not in the Indies of the sixteenth century, not in the Holy Land of the twelfth century, not even in the equally humdrum and frequently frustrating routine of a parish life filled with days of people’s problems and this world’s concerns, but here in the seemingly hopeless conditions of a camp where men struggled simply to survive and took pride and comfort in having survived just one more day.

They had to convince themselves, these prisoner-priests, of the need to renew their faith in the belief that Christ’s victory was the guarantee of their victory. The kingdom of God had to be worked out on earth, for that was the meaning of the Incarnation. It had to be worked out by men, by other Christs; it had to be worked out this day, each day, by constant effort and attention to just those persons and circumstances God presented to them that day. The “kingdom of God” had indeed been begun on earth with the coming of Christ, but the world had not visibly changed at his birth. Twelve Galilean fishermen had been instructed to tell the good news to the whole world – and how hopeless a task that must have seemed even to the boldest of them after Pentecost! Twenty centuries later, the kingdom of God was still a mustard seed, and priests like themselves still faced the impossible task of making men who had never believed, or who had yielded up their beliefs under the pressure of daily life or a barrage of propaganda, listen again to the good news of

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<sup>†</sup> Father is speaking of his experiences between 1939 - 1954 in the Soviet GULAG system of prisons. “Gulag” is an acronym in Russian referring to the ‘universal state security & labor camps’. Consider that since we men, all, are living out the just sentence of God’s punishment for the original and our own sins, we pilgrims too find ourselves in similar evil circumstances & conditions Father Ciszek here describes; that is, though the intensity or perhaps severity almost inevitably will vary, we and all creation (as St. Paul reminds [Rom. viii:23](#)) labor, groaning within ourselves until the redemption wrought by Christ reaches full maturity in those he has called, justified, and glorified.

salvation and God's love – and come to believe in him. That good news reached men one at a time, by God's grace and according to his providence, not in some great and visionary crusade or overnight through some miraculous event. Each day, every day of our lives, God presents to us the people and opportunities upon which he expects us to act. He expects no more of us, but he will accept nothing less of us; and we fail in our promise and commitment if we do not see in the situations of every moment of every day his divine will.

That is how the kingdom of God has been spread from the time of Christ's coming until now. It depends on the faith and commitment of every man, but especially of the priest, every day of his life. Every moment of every man's life is precious in God's sight, and none must be wasted through doubt and discouragement. The work of the kingdom, the work of laboring and suffering with Christ, is no more spectacular for the most part than the routine of daily living. Perhaps a priest experiences no spectacular successes, at least as man measures successes, no miraculous conversions, no enthusiastic displays of devotion, nothing dramatic at all. Yet he must come to believe, and be firmly convinced, that Christ is the guarantor of his success. Christ has arranged for him to be here, this day and among these people, in order that the kingdom of God may be advanced in this place and among these people. As a priest, he must be a witness in a special way to the power of the kingdom to transform all things human, even the tortured and twisted, the humdrum and the seemingly insignificant. In fact, it is the unspectacular and the seemingly hopeless that are the real challenge. For these things, too, must be transformed and redeemed, if Christ's victory is to be complete. The kingdom of God will not be brought to fulfillment on earth by one great, sword-swinging battle against the powers of darkness. But only by each of us laboring and suffering day after day as Christ labored and suffered, until all things at last have been transformed. And this process of transformation continues until the end of time.

from the chapter titled, "Freedom"  
pp. 156-157 \*

[...] The body can be confined, but nothing can destroy the deepest freedom in man, the freedom of the soul, and the freedom of mind and will. These are the highest and noblest faculties in man, they are what make him the sort of man he is, and they cannot be constrained. Even in prison a man retains his free will, his freedom of choice. Even in prison,

a man can choose to do good or evil, to fight for survival or to despair, to serve God and others or to turn inward and selfish. Free will remains and so freedom remains, for freedom is simply defined as the state of being free, and not coerced by necessity or fate or circumstances in one's choices or actions.

*That* freedom is absolute, and yet freedom itself is not an absolute as many today would have us believe. Young people, too, often yearn for freedom and independence as if these were somehow absolutes. They speak of freedom as of a good in itself, as if it exists in some ideal order, unfettered by obligations and duty. This drive for independence and freedom on the part of the young is a natural thing, a part of the process of growing up, of becoming mature individuals, of cutting the apron strings and preparing for adult life. Yet parents fail in their duty to their children if they let this tendency go unchecked, unrestrained, and do not insist that children exercise their freedom in the context of duties and obligations at home and in school, to parents and family, to friends and to those in authority. For the adult world that a child so ardently desires to attain, that he looks forward to so eagerly and impatiently, is also a world in which freedom is greatly modified by circumstances, by concrete obligations and limitations, and it is only in this real world of daily life that human freedom, such as it is, exists, and not in some ideal order.

\* ***He Leadeth Me***

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