



DISCERNMENT

In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary. And coming to her, he said, "Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you."

But she was greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

But Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?" And the angel said to her in reply, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. And behold, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren; for nothing will be impossible for God."

Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word."

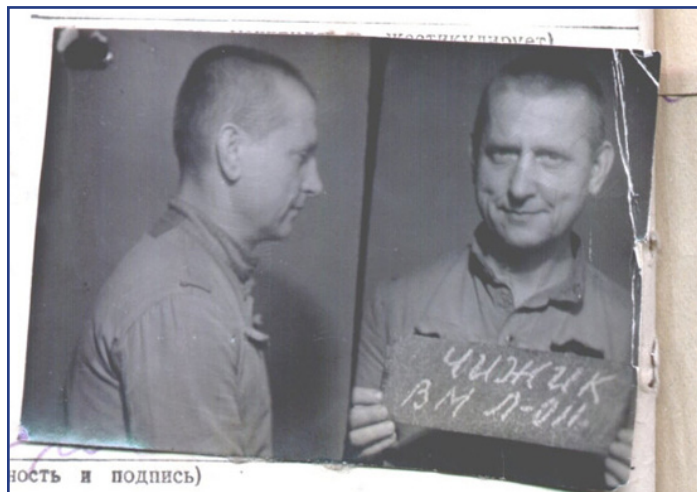
- LUKE 1:26-38 ^[1]

READING

WITH GOD IN RUSSIA: FR. CISZEK TAKES CHARGE. ^[2]

Fr. Walter Ciszek (1904-1984) was a Jesuit priest sent to work in Poland in the late 1930s. When the Soviet Army invaded, the priest was arrested as a "spy" in 1941. He was to spend five years in Lubyanka prison, where he would be tortured, kept awake, and interrogated, before being subjected to fifteen years of brutal slave labor in the freezing cold of Siberia.

After almost his first year in prison he was told what his sentence was. He knew that going to Siberia probably meant he



Fr. Walter Ciszek's prison photo.

would die and that there would be no appeal. Here he describes what happened after he was taken back to his solitary cell after the sentencing. Two days passed. He could have despaired; instead, on the third day, he decided to take charge of his life.

"I began to read Russian literature. I started with Tolstoy and read almost all his works. I established a new order of the day for myself; spiritual duties before noon, then read till dinnertime. Before dinner, I'd make my noonday examination of conscience and say the Angelus when the Kremlin clock chimed twelve. After the noon meal, I said my three sets of beads in Polish, Russian, and Latin, then went back to reading until it was time for the exercise period or the trip to the toilet. After supper, I'd say my evening prayers and hymns from memory, then back to the books again until it was time for bed.

"That was my daily order, and nobody bothered me for more than a year. Except for the occasional visits from the chief of the prison and the weekly health inspection and examination for parasites, I saw no one but the guards. I became, in effect, a hermit, alone with my prayer and my books. I even found myself forgetting how to talk! Occasionally I was almost tongue-tied in talking to the doctor, or the warden on his infrequent visits.

"Besides the daily twenty-minute exercise, I tried to keep myself active by polishing the floor twice a day. We were required to do this once a day at Lubyanka in any event, but while many of the prisoners gave it the proverbial lick and a promise, I really worked at it, just for the sheer joy of being active. The floors at Lubyanka

[1] Scripture taken from the New American Bible, Revised Edition, available at <http://www.usccb.org/bible/books-of-the-bible>

[2] See Fr. Walter J. Ciszek, *With God in Russia* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997). Also visit http://www.Ciszek.org/About_Ciszek.html for more information.



READING *continued*

were of good solid oak, which took a beautiful sheen. I'd dust the floor first with a soft rag, then rub in the wax, which came in big sticks, and afterward go over it with a heavy iron wrapped in cloth—and plenty of elbow grease—to polish it to a high shine.

“With all the time on my hands now, I also set about mending the clothes I had been wearing ever since I was arrested a Chusovoy. By now they were in bad shape...

We had been sentenced to hard labor, but there was no reason we had to be depressed... We set out to make the best of it.

“I stressed not only the spiritual side of life but the physical side as well. Every day I took at least forty–five minutes of calisthenics to keep my body as active as my mind was with the books. I kept myself and my clothes as neat and clean as I could, my room spotless. I was determined through all this long, enforced idleness to remain human and mentally alert and not to let the prison routine get me down... I knew nothing of the outside world, but I kept track of the time and the days, remembering all the feast days of the Church as best I could, celebrating them with special prayers that I remembered or made up.

“And I went at my course in Russian literature with a vengeance. Besides Tolstoy, I read Dostoevsky, Turgenev, Gogol, Leskov, and many of the works of Jack London, Dickens, Shakespeare, Goethe, Schiller –and even Quo Vadis—all in Russian. I also read quite a bit of Russian history (126-128).”

For a few months another priest was imprisoned with him.

“[We] formed a little Jesuit community right in the heart of Moscow. First of all, after all these long years of being without the sacrament, we went to confession and made a manifestation of conscience. Then we made up a daily order for ourselves which was little different from that of any Jesuit community anywhere. We rose at 5:30 –as did everyone else in the prison –made a morning meditation and said Mass (i.e., the prayers of the Mass) before breakfast. Then we'd talk or work until time for our examination of conscience and the Angelus at noon.

“In the afternoon we said more prayers, including the rosary, in common. We'd say the Angelus again at six o'clock before

supper, then after supper make our evening devotions, taking turns giving one another points for the morning meditation. Morning and afternoon, during the times between prayer, we kept busy. We spent some time reviewing our theology studies together; we preached extempore sermons or gave lectures, criticizing one another –then we'd fall to laughing over similar criticisms or incidents in our earlier training.

“Occasionally we would turn to lighter diversions and impromptu skits. I was easily the comedian...

“There was nothing better than a joke to break the almost trancelike state of boredom that occasionally crept into the most active schedule in the midst of prison routine... We had been sentenced to hard labor, but there was no reason we had to be depressed... We set out to make the best of it (150-152).”

Fr. Cizek was a heroic priest. He told his story in two books, *He Leadeth Me* and *With God in Russia*. In the latter book, we get a glimpse of the simple, daily habits Fr. Cizek developed to keep himself sane, normal, open to the will of God, and able to carry out God's will. He had a plan of life which helped him learn and fulfill God's will in his life.



Fr. Walter Cizek's upon his return home in 1963

He was absolutely forbidden at all times to engage in priestly activities. Later in the Gulag camps, he suffered extreme conditions of cold, hunger, surveillance, and threats. He worked more than sixteen hours a day and continued to hear confessions, offer spiritual counsel, give retreats, and say mass in secret whenever he could.

Fr. Cizek's family and his brother priests thought he was dead, but in 1963 he was traded back to the USA for two spies. His sister, a nun, was there to greet him when he returned. He had been gone for almost twenty-five years. Today, people are gathering information for his canonization.

<p>WHAT DO I ALREADY DO? <i>Note which things you do already and think about ways you could do these things with more care and thoughtfulness. Use the space to take notes.</i></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Sunday Mass <input type="checkbox"/> Mass during the week</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Eucharistic Adoration <input type="checkbox"/> Benediction</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Regular Confession</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Daily mental prayer</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Prayers before meals <input type="checkbox"/> Morning prayers <input type="checkbox"/> Evening prayers <input type="checkbox"/> Aspirations ^[4] <input type="checkbox"/> Devotion to Mary—Rosary, picture or statue of Mary, Angelus at 6 a.m., noon, p.m. <input type="checkbox"/> Devotion to Saints—reading about saints, special prayers to saints, saints’ pictures</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Spiritual Reading <input type="checkbox"/> Scripture Reading</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Retreat <input type="checkbox"/> Learning more Catholic Doctrine <input type="checkbox"/> Penance</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Service—to families (including your own), to children, the unborn, the poor, the elderly, the sick, the church.</p>	<p>WHAT COULD I ADD THIS YEAR? <i>Set 1 or 2 goals. Remember, it is better to aim for what is doable, than to aim too high and get discouraged.</i></p> <p>Goal 1: By this date _____, I would like to . . .</p> <p>To reach this goal, I will . . .</p> <p>Goal 2: By this date _____, I would like to . . .</p> <p>To reach this goal, I will . . .</p>	<p>WHERE DO I WANT TO BE IN MY PLAN OF LIFE BY THE TIME I AM 18? <i>Set goal for what you want to have as part of your life at this long-term projection, and note how you will achieve these goals.</i></p> <p>Goal 1: By this date _____, I would like to . . .</p> <p>To reach this goal, I will . . .</p> <p>Goal 2: By this date _____, I would like to . . .</p> <p>To reach this goal, I will . . .</p>
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[4] Quick prayer said during the day; usually attached to some reminder event like when an ambulance drives by, or when you pass a church or cemetery; any words can be said—your choice—“Have mercy on me a sinner” or “My Lord and My God.”



CLOSING

TIPS ON PRAYER

St. Teresa of Avila was a smart woman, a nun, a good writer, a lover of life, and a master of prayer. She struggled to know her vocation when she was young. She wrote: “Still I had no desire to be a nun, and I asked God not to give me this vocation; although I also feared marriage.”^[5] She was named a Doctor of the Church for what she taught about prayer, so she is a good model for anyone who wants to be open to God’s will. Here’s what we can learn from her writings.



1. **Prayer makes you normal.** Don’t worry about how you will look to other people if you start a habit of prayer and virtue. St. Teresa of Avila would call that worry a definite temptation. She says, “If we turn from self towards God, our understanding and our will become nobler and readier to embrace all that is good: if we never rise above the slough of our own miseries we do ourselves a great disservice.”^[6]
2. **You don’t have to be holy or good at prayer to pray.** God loves us the way we are now. The whole reason for praying is because we can always improve and be better than what we are right now, and God wants the best

for us. But it may be easy to think only holy people are privileged enough to talk to God. St. Teresa suffered this temptation; she stopped praying because she thought she was so bad. Later she saw what a clever trick of the Devil’s that was. She says, “This was the most terrible trick the devil could play on me, under the guise of humility: that seeing myself so corrupted I began to fear the practice of prayer.”^[7] Prayer is for everyone, because God wants to have a close relationship with each person!

3. **Don’t aim for nice feelings.** The point of prayer is to draw us to God. Sometimes this will feel sweet and holy; sometimes this will feel dry and boring. Believe it or not, both of these things are good! God uses these different periods to help us grow up and make us real, mature, trustworthy friends. Therefore, never use prayer as a way to get “consolation” or good feelings. Growth in love of God and holiness are signs of good prayer. St. Teresa writes: “perfection consists not in consolations, but in the increase of love; on this, too, will depend our reward, as well as on the righteousness and truth which are in our actions.”^[8]
4. **Never give up prayer.** No matter what happens to you, you will never be lost if you keep up a habit of prayer. St. Teresa wrote: “Whoever has not begun the practice of prayer, I beg for the love of the Lord not to go without so great a good.... if one perseveres, I trust then in the mercy of God, who never fails to pay anyone who has taken Him for a friend.”^[9]

Prayer leads to knowing your vocation and being able to live it out. Take heart! Building a habit of prayer is a battle; but with God’s grace, you can win it! Learning your vocation goes hand in hand with the habit of prayer—that’s how you learn it and get the strength to live it out.

[5] Teresa of Avila, “Autobiography,” in *The Collected Works of Teresa of Avila*, Volume 1, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1987), 3.2.

[6] Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, translation by E. Allison Peers, 1.2, paragraph 19. Available at <http://www.ewtn.com/library/SPIRIT/CASTLE.TXT>

[7] Teresa of Avila, “Autobiography,” in *The Collected Works of Teresa of Avila*, Volume 1, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1987), 7.1.

[8] Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, translation by E. Allison Peers, 3.2, paragraph 11. Available at <http://www.ewtn.com/library/SPIRIT/CASTLE.TXT>

[9] Teresa of Avila, “Autobiography,” in *The Collected Works of Teresa of Avila*, Volume 1, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1987), 8.5.