

AUTHORS OF *With God in Russia*

HE

LEADETH

ME

An Extraordinary Testament of Faith



WALTER J. CISZEK, S.J.,
WITH DANIEL L. FLAHERTY, S.J.

HE

LEADETH

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The Lord's my shepherd, I'll not want

He makes me down to lie

In pastures green He leadeth me

The quiet waters by.

Yea, though I walk through death's valley

Yet will I fear no ill,

For Thou art with me and Thy rod

And staff me comfort still.

To my Russian friends,

Nikolai

Andrei

Ivan

Albert

Giorgi

Vladimir

Katia

Victor

Yekaterina

May He lead them as He led me.

*And to my sister Helen Gearhart
and my dear friend Father Edward McCawley, S.J.,
whom He already leads.*

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PROLOGUE

On October 12, 1963, I landed at New York's Idlewild Airport after having spent twenty-three years in the Soviet Union and most of that time in prison or the slave labor camps of Siberia. Some of my friends and family on hand that day said that I stepped off BOAC flight no. 501 like some new Columbus, about to rediscover America and take up again the life of a free man. I felt nothing of that. Nor did I know that I had officially been listed as dead since 1947 and that my Jesuit colleagues had said Masses for the repose of my soul when it was thought I had died in a Soviet prison. I felt only a simple sense of gratitude to God for having sustained me through those years and, in his providence, bringing me home again at last.

It was shortly after I left home and family in Shenandoah, Pennsylvania, to join the Jesuits in 1928 that I first volunteered for the "Russian missions." Pope Pius XI wrote a letter in 1929 to all seminarians, "especially our Jesuit sons," asking for men to enter a new Russian center being started at Rome to prepare young clerics for possible future work in Russia. I studied my theology there and learned to say Mass in the Byzantine rite in preparation for work in Russia. But after I was ordained, there was no way to send priests into Russia, so I was assigned instead to an Oriental rite mission staffed by Jesuits in Albertyn, Poland.

I was working there when war broke out in September 1939. The German Army took Warsaw, but the Red Army overran eastern Poland and Albertyn. In the confusion and aftermath of these invasions, I followed many Polish refugees into Russia. Disguised as a worker, I accompanied them in the hope of being able to minister to their spiritual needs. But I didn't fool the Soviet secret police. As soon as Germany invaded Russia in June 1941, I was picked up by the NKVD and put into prison.

I was taken by train to the dread Lubyanka Prison in Moscow for interrogation as a “Vatican spy.” I remained there all through the war years, undergoing periodic and often intense questioning by the NKVD. Then, after five years, I was sentenced to fifteen years at hard labor in the prison camps of Siberia. Along with thousands of others, I was put to work in labor brigades doing outdoor construction in the extreme arctic cold, or in coal and copper mines, ill clothed, ill fed, and poorly housed in the timber barracks surrounded by barbed wire and a “death zone.” Men died in those camps, especially those who gave up hope. But I trusted in God, never felt abandoned or without hope, and survived along with many others. I never looked on my survival as anything special or extraordinary, but I did give thanks to God for sustaining and preserving me through those years.

When my term at last ran out, I was not completely free. Because I had been “convicted” on a charge of espionage, I could not leave Siberia and return to the main cities of Russia, let alone leave the country. So I remained in the villages and towns of Siberia, working as an auto mechanic among other things, until I was finally exchanged in 1963 for two convicted Russian spies, thanks to the efforts of family and friends and the good offices of the U.S. State Department. Upon my arrival, my religious superiors and a number of publishers convinced me that there was a great deal of public interest in the story of my years inside the Soviet Union, those years when I had actually been given up for dead. So I agreed to tell that story and did so in the book *With God in Russia*.

Yet, to be perfectly honest, that was not the book I wanted to write. I felt that I had learned much during those years of hardship and suffering that could be of help to others in their lives. For every man’s life contains its share of suffering; each of us is occasionally driven almost to despair, to ask why God allows evil and suffering to overtake him or those he loves. I had seen a great deal of suffering in the camps and the prisons in those around me, had almost despaired myself, and had learned in those darkest of hours to turn to God for consolation and to trust in him alone.

“How did you manage to survive?” is the question most often asked me by newsmen and others ever since my return home. My answer has always been the same: “God’s providence.” Yet I knew that simple statement could never satisfy the questioner or ever begin to convey all I meant by it. Through the long years of isolation and suffering, God had led me to an

understanding of life and his love that only those who have experienced it can fathom. He had stripped away from me many of the external consolations, physical and religious, that men rely on and had left me with a core of seemingly simple truths to guide me. And yet what a profound difference they had made in my life, what strength they gave me, what courage to go on! I wanted to tell others about them—indeed, I felt one reason that God in his providence had brought me safely home was so that I might help others understand these truths a little better.

So, even in the pages of that first book, *With God in Russia*, I tried to say something of what I had learned and felt I must say, to give some hint at least of the truths that had guided and sustained me. I knew I had not done it adequately or properly within the limitations of those pages, but I was consoled by the many letters and personal requests for spiritual guidance I received, which indicated that somehow readers of that story had read far more between the lines than I had been able to say. I knew then that I must someday write this book.

I also knew, though, that I could not do it alone. Strong as the motivations were that compelled me to write it, strong as were my desires, I knew only too well that my limited talents as a writer were inadequate to the task. I never considered myself a writer, and I never will. Yet the idea of the message I had to communicate and share with others was so strong within me that, after two years of hesitation, I turned once more to Father Daniel L. Flaherty, S.J., who had been such a help to me in producing the first book, and explained to him my ideas and my dreams for this book. To me he is more than a collaborator or excellent editor; in the few brief years I have known him and worked with him, he has become one of my closest friends, almost a part of my soul. If he had said no, I think I would have abandoned there and then any idea of further writing once and for all. But he didn't say no. He agreed to help me again, and his encouragement fostered my enthusiasm to push ahead.

I found, however, that this was a far more difficult book to write—and it took me a long time to put into words what I felt I wanted to say. It took even longer sometimes for Dan to understand me, for it is hard for one man to catch another's spirit and put into print the things that drive him on. Yet somehow, with God's help, the prayers of many friends, and Dan's patient collaboration, this book has at last taken shape and is ready to appear in

print, God willing, after months of persistent effort. And now that it has finally been completed, I can only hope and pray it proves helpful to those who may read it.

If so, I want to take occasion here to express my thanks and deep gratitude to all who helped me in so many ways—with their prayers and with their material and moral support—to finish a task I feared all along to tackle alone. I think it is obvious how deeply indebted I am to Dan for giving me so much of his time and energy to accomplish what I felt had to be done. I am also indebted to Father John B. Amberg, S.J., for permitting me to live at Canisius House, the Jesuit house of writers in Evanston, Illinois, connected with Loyola University Press, and for letting me spend over half a year there seriously engaged in the final preparation of this manuscript. I am no less indebted to all the members of the Canisius House community for tolerating my presence and helping by their congeniality to make my stay with them a most pleasant and productive experience, a time I shall never forget. I owe my deepest thanks of all, of course, to the members of the community of the John XXIII Center for Eastern studies at Fordham University, of which I am a member. It was they who agreed to let me be absent from the community for over six months and spend the time in writing, while they took upon themselves the responsibilities of fulfilling the work I would have had to perform as an active member of the community if present. Sincere thanks, too, to Mary Helen O'Neill for the generous contributions she made to aid me throughout the long and difficult process of writing. Last of all, my deep gratitude to all those not mentioned by name for all the help, large and small, they offered me during this time. To all, my prayers and good wishes.

WALTER J. CISZEK, S.J.

Canisius House

July 31, 1972

Feast of Saint Ignatius Loyola

ALBERTYN

The Red Army is here. They've taken the town. The Soviets are here." The news spread like panic through the small village of Albertyn, Poland, on October 17, 1939. I had just finished Mass and breakfast on that memorable morning, when bewildered parishioners came to the mission to tell me the news. It was news we had feared ever since it had become clear that Germany and Russia were dividing up Poland. But now our fears were a reality. The Red Army was in Albertyn.

One by one the parishioners came crowding to the mission to ask my opinion, to seek my advice, looking for a word of hope or consolation. They were worried about their families. They were worried about their sons in the Polish Army, or their husbands in the government. They were worried about their children and what would happen to them all. I tried to be reassuring, but what could I really say? I had no answers to their immediate questions of fact, and how could I reassure them about the future or comfort them in the midst of the turmoil that had overtaken the town? What could I tell them except to pray and to trust in God?

Even in that I felt foolish. I had been with them a little more than a year; I had been ordained a little more than two years. How inexperienced and immature I felt at this sudden crisis of such proportions. Supported by the routines of a parish priest, I had ministered to these people in their daily problems, helped them, consoled them, said Mass and brought Communion to the sick, anointed the dying. I had made many friends among them, and they trusted me, young as I was—the young American in their midst. But the war changed everything. The crises they faced now were not family quarrels or sickness or the loss of a loved one. The advice they wanted now

was not about things common to every parish and learned by every priest. Suddenly, our whole world, theirs and mine, had changed.

It is impossible to describe the feeling that comes over you at such a time. The feeling that somehow, in an instant of time, everything is changed and nothing again will ever be quite the same. That tomorrow will never again be like yesterday. That the very trees, the grass, the air, the daylight are no longer the same, for the world has changed. It is a feeling impossible to describe, and yet one that every wife who has lost a husband knows well, one that every child who has tasted evil for the first time or faced a sudden crisis has experienced. It is that feeling that leaves the heart saying, "Oh, if only I could turn back the clock to before it happened, if only it had never happened, if only I had it to do over again."

My fears were vague that morning, though the feeling of inadequacy was very real. And the fears themselves quickly ceased to be vague and became quite real in turn. Arrests soon followed the arrival of the Red Army. Property was confiscated. There were countless interrogations, threats, and intimidations, as the Communists endeavored to round up everyone they considered a threat to them or to their new order.

In all this, the Church itself became a special target for attack. The Oriental rite church at our mission was closed immediately; the Latin rite parish was allowed to function for a while for those few families who dared to attend. The rest of our mission buildings were taken over by the Red Army and used to quarter troops. A propaganda campaign was mounted against the Church and against the priests; we labored under a campaign of constant harassment and incidents large and small. And it was effective. Even the most faithful became cautious about visiting the church or seeing a priest. Young people dropped away quickly. Workers soon learned they could lose their jobs if they insisted upon attending religious services. Our activity as priests was limited strictly to the church; we could not go to the people unless they came to us. Few of them dared to do so. Soon our ministry consisted solely of saying Mass on Sunday for a few old people. The Jesuit mission, which had flourished for ten years in Albertyn, was destroyed in a matter of weeks.

Again and again, as I watched all this happen, I had to force myself not to think of the question that kept returning unbidden to mind: "Why has God allowed this evil to happen?" Why persecutions? If God must allow natural

disasters, or even wars because of human failings, why can't he at least allow his flock to be shepherded and comforted during such calamities? Surely he could defend and protect his flock instead of having it singled out for special attack such as this. The perplexity and pain grew within me as I saw the visible Church, once strong and organized, dissolve under the attacks of these invaders and watched the people grow estranged, pressured ceaselessly into accepting this new order. And what of the young people who were literally torn away from their parents and forced to join the Young Pioneers or Komsomol organizations, taught to report on any "deviations" of the old people at home? How frustrating it was to hear the Church and priests and religious openly slandered in Communist propaganda, and to know that the children had to learn and repeat atheist doctrines every day in school and in their classwork. How could God allow all this? And why?

I did not blame the people. I knew they had not lost their faith but were just afraid right now to practice it openly. They came to me at night to ask how they should conduct themselves, to ask whether it was wrong to cooperate with the new order, to ask if they should let their children join the Komsomol organizations, or whether they themselves should join the labor unions. And finally, they came to ask whether, under the circumstances, it was wrong not to come to church on Sundays or feast days. And what could I tell them? How much heroism could I ask of them? How much did God, who had allowed all this to happen, expect of these simple, ordinary people of the backwoods of Albertyn?

It was agony for me as a priest to ask these questions, but it was impossible not to ask them. They crowded to mind in times of prayer, they came at Mass, they came all through the days and nights. And I'm sure they came not to me alone. It was not a crisis of faith, any more than it is for anyone who has ever suffered a great loss or faced a family tragedy and asked himself the same questions. It was rather a crisis of understanding, and no one need be ashamed to admit he has been troubled by it. Anyone who has done much reading in the Old Testament is familiar with those questions. "How long, O Lord, how long will you allow our enemies to triumph over us?" Most especially in the days after David, in the ages of captivity, when the glories of the golden age of Solomon were but a memory by the rivers of Babylon and Israel had been broken and led away

in shame, does the question recur again and again. To Israel, surely, it must have seemed the end of the world, the end of the covenant, the end of God's special care for his chosen people.

Yet, from our vantage point in history, we know it was really quite the opposite. Israel's troubles were in truth a manifestation of Yahweh's special providence, his special love for his chosen people. Like a fond and loving father, he was trying to wean them away from trust in kings or princes or in armies or the powers of this world. He was trying to teach them, again and again, that their faith must only be in him alone. He was leading them, through every trial and in every age, to the realization that God alone is faithful in all tribulations, that he alone is constant in his love and must be clung to, even when it seems all else has been turned upside down. Yahweh is still the Lord behind the events and happenings of this world; he can be found there, and he must be sought in them, so that his will may be done. It was he who had chosen them, not they him. It was he who had first made the covenant with them, who had led them and cared for them, shepherded and fed and guarded them in every tribulation. Their part in the covenant must be to trust in him alone, to remain always faithful, to look to him and not to other gods, to rely on him and not on rulers or on chariots or bowmen. He was ever faithful, and so in turn must they be, even when he led them where they would not go, into a land they knew not, or into exile. For he had chosen them, they were his people, he would no more forget them than a mother could forget the child of her womb—yet neither, in their turn, must they ever forget him.

This is a hard lesson. And the Old Testament is a chronicle of the many times and the many ways God tried to teach that lesson to his chosen people. And it is a record, too, of how very often, in times of peace and prosperity, Israel came to take Yahweh for granted, to settle down in some routine and to accept the status quo as the be-all and the end-all, to think of the established order as their support and sustenance, and to forget their ultimate goal and destiny as the people of the covenant. Then Yahweh would have to remind them again, by the downfall of the monarchy or by exile or the destruction of Jerusalem, that he alone must be their ultimate hope, their sole source of support, for he had chosen them out of all the people of the world to be a sign of his power and his love, and they must testify to him before all the world by the witness of their trust in him alone.

That same lesson each of us must learn, difficult or not. How easy it is, in times of ease, for us to become dependent on our routines, on the established order of our day-to-day existence, to carry us along. We begin to take things for granted, to rely on ourselves and on our own resources, to “settle in” in this world and look to it for our support. We all too easily come to equate being comfortable with a sense of well-being, to seek our comfort solely in the sense of being comfortable. Friends and possessions surround us, one day is followed by the next, good health and happiness for the most part are ours. We don’t have to desire much of the things of this world—to be enamored of riches, for example, or greedy or avaricious—in order to have gained this sense of comfort and of well-being, to trust in them as our support—and to take God for granted. It is the status quo that we rely on, that carries us from day to day, and somehow we begin to lose sight of the fact that under all these things and behind all these things, it is God who supports and sustains us. We go along, taking for granted that tomorrow will be very much like today, comfortable in the world we have created for ourselves, secure in the established order we have learned to live with, however imperfect it may be, and give little thought to God at all.

Somehow, then, God must contrive to break through those routines of ours and remind us once again, like Israel, that we are ultimately dependent only upon him, that he has made us and destined us for life with him through all eternity, that the things of this world and this world itself are not our lasting city, that his we are and that we must look to him and turn to him in everything. Then it is, perhaps, that he must allow our whole world to be turned upside down in order to remind us it is not our permanent abode or final destiny, to bring us to our senses and restore our sense of values, to turn our thoughts once more to him—even if at first our thoughts are questioning and full of reproaches. Then it is that he must remind us again, with terrible clarity, that he meant exactly what he said in those seemingly simple words of the Sermon on the Mount: “Do not be anxious about what you shall eat, or what you shall wear, or where you shall sleep, but seek first the kingdom of God and his justice.”

So it was with the people of Israel, who must learn not to put their trust in princes or in kingdoms but to be faithful only to Yahweh as he was ever faithful to them, and to put all their trust in him. So it has been throughout the history of the New Testament. There have been changes and upheavals

in the Church herself, there have been persecutions. It is not princes or rulers, structures or organizations, that sustain the Church. It is God who sustains her. So must it be in Albertyn. God is constant in his love if we will but look to him, he will sustain us in every storm if we will but cry out to him, he will save us if we will but reach out our hand to him. He is there, if we will only turn to him and learn to trust in him alone. The upheavals in this world, or in the Church herself, are not the end of everything, especially of his love. They can in fact serve best as signs to remind us of his love and of his constancy, to make us turn once more to him and cling to him again when all else that we counted on is overturned around us.

And so it is in each of our lives. It is a sad commentary on our human frailty that we fail to think of God or see him behind the comfortable routines of our day-to-day existence. It is only in a crisis that we remember him and turn to him, often as querulous and questioning children. It is in moments of loss or family tragedy or personal despair that men turn to him and ask, “Why?”—indeed are almost forced to turn to him, again and at last, for help and for support and consolation. Mysteriously, God in his providence must make use of our tragedies to remind our fallen human nature of his presence and his love, of the constancy of his concern and care for us. It is not vindictiveness on his part; he does not send us tragedies to punish us for having so long forgotten him. The failing is on our part. He is always present and ever faithful; it is we who fail to see him or to look for him in times of ease and comfort, to remember he is there, shepherding and guarding and providing us the very things we come to count on and expect to sustain us every day. Yet we fail to remember that, comfortable as we are in our established order and the status quo, as day follows day.

So it was in Albertyn, as the war tore apart the fabric of our once peaceful lives, my own included, that I came to understand more clearly and in some small way this truth in all its terrible simplicity: “Do not be anxious, therefore, saying what shall we eat or what shall we wear, or where shall we sleep, for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. Seek first the kingdom of God and his justice.” We would survive, although the world around us had changed completely. We would go on, today and tomorrow and the next day, picking up the pieces and working out each day our eternal destiny and our salvation. There would be a tomorrow, and we would have to live in it—and God would be there as

well. The Church would survive, perhaps not exactly as we had known it at the mission, because the faith would survive among the people of God as it had always survived in times of persecution. One thing only need be of great concern to us in all this seeming upheaval and catastrophe: to be faithful to God and to look to him in everything, confident of his love and his constancy, aware that this world and this new order was not our lasting city any more than the previous one had been, and striving always to know his will and to do it each day of our lives.