

The True Presence of Christ in the prison camps

In Chapter thirteen of *He Leadeth Me*, Fr. Walter Ciszek states, "Sometimes I think that those who have never been deprived of an opportunity to say or hear Mass do not really appreciate what a treasure the Mass is" (pg. 122). He goes on in detail about the trials and risks that he, fellow Priests, and other prisoners went through in order to say/hear Mass and receive the Body and Blood of Christ. They worked in the bitter cold with barely enough food to keep their physical bodies going. Yet these brave souls would give up their meager breakfast and sometimes other meals in order to keep the fast for the opportunity to receive Christ in the Eucharist. There were many informants in the camps and the consequences for Fr. Walter and others were severe if caught. It could have been easy to excuse themselves from such things because of the risk. Perhaps Fr. Walter was prepared to take the risk because of his 5 year residency in Lubianka.

In Lubianka, he was in solitary confinement where he had the opportunity to pray and talk with God endlessly. He made many spiritual communions throughout his day. He knew that God was with him. But he could not have the Sacramental Presence. This hunger for Christ's physical presence was "... as real to me as the bodily hunger I constantly experienced through those years"(pg. 126). Perhaps Fr. Walter could really feel the need for the sacramental presence because he was in such union with God in all the other ways yet he knew that he was not complete without the most important gift that Jesus gave to us so long ago.

"Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood," Christ said to his disciples, "you shall not have life in you. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood shall have life and have it more abundantly" (pg. 132).

Perhaps since Fr. Walter's mind and heart were full of Christ, without a lot of distractions.... (Except for the constant hunger and wondering when the next interrogation was to come!), he felt this hunger.

For the Catholic prisoners and Priests, the Eucharist was truly their Bread of Life. Fr. Walter reflects that when receiving the Eucharist, "The experience was very real; you could feel its effects upon your mind and heart... it was a necessity, to foster the life of the soul, just as much as our daily bread was necessary to sustain the body" (pg. 125). These people lived in the worst of conditions, one of the worst recorded in human history. And Fr. Walter states that "Mass and the Blessed Sacrament were a source of great consolation to me; they were the source of my strength and joy and spiritual sustenance"(pg. 132).

The prison camps were wretched, yet Fr. Walter felt JOY there, because he was able to receive Christ. Let us thank God for Fr. Walter and his story. Let us pray that in our everyday life of doing

God's will , we too may experience such an intimate union with God, longing for him in the Eucharist, and finding true Joy in receiving Him even in the midst of our trials, tribulations, and challenges in life!