

Ciszekian Spirituality for a Seminarian

I was introduced to Fr Walter Cizek during my first year of college Seminary in Scranton PA. The house spiritual director, Fr. Jeff Walsh, used Fr Cizek as the topic in a conference he gave during Lent of 2004. I remember being moved by the description of this Priest, by his love for the Eucharist and by what he suffered for the Faith, but I did not follow up with any personal reading of my own.

Three years later I was in my last year of college seminary, in that crucial transition point in the life of a seminarian where one decides to leave formation or to go on to Major Seminary to continue towards the Priesthood. That Fall semester I had reached a semi-crisis point in my life where I had many worries and anxieties about the future. Christmas break was extremely difficult, things seemed to be all going wrong, and everything was falling in on me, or so I thought. I came back to the seminary with a great heaviness of soul and prepared myself for an arduous five-day retreat that I knew would be difficult. I had my own ideas of what I wanted to do for that time of silence. I had some spiritual reading picked out that I was convinced would help me through my difficulties. Because of certain events I was unable to bring what I had wanted on the retreat and instead found myself with Fr. Cizek's *He Leadeth Me* as my sole spiritual reading for the week. I was not expecting much more out of it than a heartwarming tale of a courageous Priest, but that was the last thing I found when actually reading it.

Learning about Fr Cizek's experiences literally changed my heart during that retreat. Looking back I can almost call it a second conversion. His struggles with God's Will and his eventual acceptance of that Will in *everything* that occurred in his life pierced me to the heart. His suffering was beyond any description of suffering I had ever come in contact with, yet his faith was so solid that nothing could move his absolute trust in God. Page after page brought tears to my eyes as I thought of the possibilities that this kind of attitude towards God and the spiritual life could render for my own journey to the Priesthood. Fr Cizek's unique ability to communicate the psychological dynamics of a living faith amidst the most harrowing circumstances impressed me deeply.

In my prayer that week an attitude of increased trust began to grow and I found that I could imagine the worst scenario of my life and it would not be even one tenth of what Fr Cizek suffered. He was able to see every event as God's all-powerful, all-loving will for him at that moment. Everything that happened to him was meaningful and valuable for the coming Kingdom

of God. If he could suffer this, walk out alive, and even attain sanctity, maybe I could experience something similar. Is there really anything to worry about when all is in the hands of our wonderful God? I learned that God allows nothing which can in any way destroy us without giving us a way to transform it into a spiritual treasure through unconditional surrender to Him. To see every scenario in one's life as willed directly or permissively by God means the greatest freedom imaginable. Nothing can hurt or hinder us then; all can serve only to draw us and everyone around us towards complete happiness in God, if only we have faith.

Needless to say, I left the retreat with a whole new outlook on my struggles and personal cross. The next semester brought me into further contact with "Ciszekian" spirituality through other great works like "Abandonment to Divine Providence" by the 17th c. Jesuit, Fr DeCaussade. The Lord also brought me into contact with great people who have embraced the way of surrender. My whole spiritual life became more simple and trusting and I continue to reap the fruits of that encounter with Fr Cizek. Since then I have read his other great work, "With God in Russia"; I have visited the Cizek Museum in Shenandoah, PA; and venerated his body on the grounds of the Jesuit retreat house in Wernersville, PA. I feel that he is a close friend to me and I pray to him daily. It seems as though he has invited me to become part of his family. After finding my way to the Cizek center I was able to view so many of his photographs and letters and touch the chair in which he died. I saw the simplicity and total dedication he lived after coming back to the states by hearing the description of his life in the Bronx. I have met Cizek devotees who are numerous, but low key. I was even introduced to a consecrated religious of the Sisters of Life in NY who has incorporated Fr Cizek's name into her own, her religious name being Sr. Maura Walter.

Fresh after another visit to the Cizek Center and to his resting place in Wernersville, I have renewed hopes that as a Priest I will be able to promote the cause and spread Fr. Cizek's message of total abandonment to God's loving Will. I wish I could do more for the practical aspect of his cause for canonization, but time and distance seem to limit this. I want to do all I can to help repay this man for all the wonderful things he has done for me and many poor sinners like me who, as Fr Cizek liked to say, "try to do our lousy best".

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