Walter Ciszek, S.J.

With God in America: The Spiritual Legacy of an Unlikely Jesuit. John DeJak and Marc Lindeijer, S.J., eds. Chicago,: Loyola Press, 2016. Pp. 264. Pb, \$19.95.

Following twenty-four years in the Soviet Union, most of it spent in the prisons of Moscow and labor camps of Siberia administered by the Soviet secret police in its various manifestations, from NKVD (People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs, Stalin's secret police) to KGB (Committee for State Security, the secret police's name from 1954 onwards), Father Walter Ciszek, a Polish-American Jesuit priest, returned to the United States of America on October 2, 1963. For much of his time in the USSR, his order and his family and friends assumed he, like so many others swept up by Stalin's henchmen, had died during his captivity. Ciszek was not able contact them until 1955, two years after the Soviet dictator's death, and would not obtain his release for another eight more years, as the Kennedy administration arranged the transfer of both Ciszek and the American graduate student Marvin Makinen for two Soviet agents, United Nations functionary Ivan Egorov and his wife Alexandra, who has been arrested by the FBI in 1961 for espionage. Upon his return Ciszek would take up a position at the John XXIII Center at Fordham University, his home for much of the rest of his life.

Almost immediately upon his arrival Ciszek became an American celebrity. During the height of the Cold War he was a rare person who had first-hand knowledge not only of daily life in the USSR, but one of its most closely guarded secrets, the vast network of labor camps known as the Gulag. Yet Ciszek was equally famous for, like another well-known Gulag survivor, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, maintaining his Christian faith in the most horrific of circumstances and serving as a spiritual leader to others. During his time in Siberian labor camps and even in Moscow's notorious Lubyanka prison, Ciszek continued to work as confessor, spiritual counselor, and performed Catholic Mass in the Byzantine rite. During his time in solitary confinement in the early 1940s and again in the late 1950s, Ciszek kept himself occupied by reciting the rosary on his fingers and spiritual meditations in his cell. Upon his return to the United States, Ciszek wrote two books: *With God in Russia* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964) and *He Leadeth Me* (New York: Doubleday, 1973), both of which, especially the former, are among the most famous spiritual testimonials of the twentieth century *With God in Russia* stands shoulder to shoulder with Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* (New York: Harper Perennial 2007), Evgenia Ginzburg's *Journey into the Whirlwind* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2002), Varlam Shalamov's *Kolyma Tales* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1995), and Janusz

Bardach's *Man is Wolf to Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) as one of finest memoirs of survival in the Gulag.

Yet, like so many others who survived imprisonment by a totalitarian regime, it is easy to assume Ciszek's story ended when he achieved his freedom. The new primary source collection *With God in America: The Spiritual Legacy of an Unlikely Jesuit*, compiled by John DeJak and Marc Lindeijer, S.J., and published by Loyola Press, attempts to rectify this problem. *With God in America* can be considered the third and final part of Ciszek's trilogy of narratives. *With God in Russia* and *He Leadeth Me* largely focus on Ciszek's youth, education with the Jesuits, and of course his two and a half decades in Stalin's and Khrushchev's Soviet Union, *With God in America* is a primary source collection of Ciszek's correspondence, spiritual and biblical reflections, speeches, and interviews with those who knew him during the remaining twenty-one years of his life, from 1963 to 1984.

The collection is divided into six sections. The first, "The Prisoner Comes Home" is among the most interesting from a historical perspective. While spending some time on Ciszek's famous return at Idlewild (now JFK) airport on October 2, 1963, it devotes considerable attention to how Ciszek had to learn to be an American again, which meant, first of all, speaking English on a regular basis, which was quite a challenge for a man who had spent the last twenty years speaking Russian a vast majority of the time. There was also the psychological shock of living in a country of incredible abundance. Ciszek's time in the Soviet Union outside of Lubyanka and the labor camps was spent almost exclusively in Siberian cities like Norilsk and Krasnoyarsk, impoverished even by Soviet standards. There were also new spiritual challenges in an America that, while not led by a government which aggressively promoted atheism, was undergoing considerable social and cultural changes which challenged the Catholic Church's position in American society. There were also Ciszek's prayers for the Russian people, his forgiveness for those who had persecuted him, and his hope for the country's spiritual revival out of atheist communism.

The second section discusses how Ciszek viewed his role as a Jesuit priest upon his return to the United States, and how his time in the USSR contributed to this. Of particular interest are Ciszek's thoughts on the existence of suffering and pain, and how Christians should respond to it. The following two chapters are devoted to the two occupations that occupied much of Ciszek's time back in the United States, as a retreat leader, especially to other Catholic clergy, and as a spiritual counselor to people who wrote to him with their concerns, anything from unplanned pregnancies to confusion about the reforms of the Second Vatican Council. The selections from Ciszek's time as a spiritual counselor are particularly enlightening, as the editors wisely selected a series

of letters between Ciszek and the same individuals, so we can view his role as counselor over an extended period of time to different individuals. The fifth chapter analyzes Ciszek's specific reflections on the Bible, the Eucharist, and the Virgin Mary, and their continued relevance in tumultuous world living in the shadow of the Cold War.

The sixth and final chapter, which, like the first, holds a primary interest for historians, as it discusses Walter Ciszek's physical decline, one of the legacies of his time as a forced laborer in Siberia; as well as his eventual passing in 1984. The chapter moves to a few essays about Ciszek's spiritual and historical legacy, written by those who knew him well, and concludes with, surprisingly but appropriately, an unpublished section of *With God in Russia* which present stories from his youth as a minor bully and his ultimate entrance into the Jesuit order.

With God in America fills a valuable gap in our knowledge of the remarkable life of Walter Ciszek. What is particularly valuable are the insights into Ciszek's cheerful and compassionate nature through his writings and anecdotes about him. One of the frequent statements about Ciszek is how his experience as a prisoner of the Soviet regime failed to crush his spirit or make him an embittered individual, and the material presented in the book ably demonstrates this time and again. There are a few notes of caution however. Those expecting *With God in America* to be a memoir similar to Ciszek's other published works are likely to be disappointed, as this is a diverse primary source collection. The opening and closing chapters are more geared towards historians, while the sections in the middle are of interest primarily to theologians. On one hand, this serves to broaden the book's appeal to a broader audience, but some may find the collection to be something they did not expect. Nevertheless, both Dejak and Lindeijer have done a commendable job revealing the importance of Ciszek's life back in the United States, and how a man who may well have been a modern-day saint continued the spiritual work that helped him survive some of the darkest environments of the twentieth century.

Sean Brennan

University of Scranton

sean.brennan@scranton.edu

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