

A hundred years ago, on July 16, 1918 to be exact, the Russian Czar Nicholas II and his family were executed by the Bolsheviks. Their murder was a result in part of scarce food and war, but also the lies that were spread by the Communists.

When revolution broke out and Nicholas abdicated in March of 1917, the family fled. One evening when they were told to stand for a photo to prove they were alive, they were all executed, and the Communists would become entrenched until another, more peaceful revolution occurred in 1991.

What can be forgotten though is just how evil Communism is and how closely it was tied in with militant atheism. In 1918, the USSR, under Lenin, implemented a policy of separation of Church and State, which meant that all Church property (including monasteries, charitable and social works and even liturgical items) was nationalized without compensation. Priests, monks and nuns (especially those who opposed these policies) were taken away to the Gulag and oftentimes executed. By 1926, there were no more Roman Catholic bishops left in the USSR. The Catholic laity also met the same fate, whether by firing squad, being sent to "corrective labor" camps, or to psychiatric hospitals for "treatment," most never to be seen again. Several thousand churches of all Christian denominations were either closed, liquidated or forcibly converted into "Museums of Atheism." By 1941, of the nearly 1,200 Catholic churches that had existed in 1917, only two were still active. In addition, parochial schools were closed and the teaching of religion to minors was outlawed. It was all based on a lie that the State was supreme, not God.

Not everyone though believed this. Many recognized a truth - that there was someone far more powerful than the individual or the state, and that was God.

And among those who would help people to see this was a young man who wasn't even Russian, but rather an American who for years would serve in the USSR, Fr. Walter Ciszek.

He was born in 1904 in Pennsylvania to Polish immigrants. And as a child and teenager, he certainly did not appear to be a future priest. Admittedly "born stubborn" as he put it, young Walter was a strong kid who liked picking fights and missing school. His father once took him to the police station and begged them to put him into reform school. But then in the 8th grade, something happened. Walter made up his mind to be a priest. His father refused to believe it, but he surprised them all and entered the Polish minor seminary. Here he continued to be tough. As he puts it, "I'd get up at four-thirty in the morning to run five miles around the lake on the seminary grounds, or go swimming in November when the lake was little better than frozen. I still couldn't stand to think that anyone could do something I couldn't do, so one year during Lent I ate nothing but bread and water for the forty days --another year I ate no meat at all for the whole year - just to see if I could do it." He was in seminary, but obviously he still had some formation to do, because he was initially doing things just to be the best. To be talked about. To be admired.

Then Walter read the life of St. Stanislaus Kostka, another tough Pole who fought his family and at fourteen walked from Warsaw to Rome to join the Jesuits. Cizek was three years from ordination. He hated the idea of "perfect obedience". But at age twenty-four without asking anyone's advice he presented himself to the provincial at 501 East Fordham Road in the Bronx and said, "I'm going to be a Jesuit." On September 7, 1928 he reported to the novitiate in Poughkeepsie, New York. Early in his first year he volunteered to go to Russia and, surprisingly, he was accepted. There was only one condition, he had to finish the course of studies first. At the end of his second year of philosophy, however, he was informed that he was to sail to Rome to begin his theological studies at the Russian College. On June 24, 1937 he was ordained and said his first Mass in the Russian rite.

No priest could go to Russia, so Fr. Walter went to Poland to teach ethics to Jesuit seminarians. The Germans then invaded from the west and the Soviets from the East. They put the religious books from the seminary in a dump truck, and all that was left was an empty chapel. Fr. Walter and another priest coned their way onto a jammed train going south to a Jesuit school, and he saw the roads filled with refugees. Getting permission from his superior, and of the Ukrainian Archbishop of Lvov, he obtained fake papers. He disguised himself as Vladimir Lypinski a widower who's family died in a German air raid. He ended up on a boxcar in March of 1940 with 25 others on a 1500 mile trip to the Ural mountains.

He worked in the summer of 40 as an unskilled laborer hauling logs. But one night early in June at 3 a. m. the barracks were surrounded by secret police. They searched everything. In Cizek's suitcase they found two bottles of white wine, a can of tooth powder, and some sheets of paper he had used to teach a little boy how to write. The agent claimed they were "bottles of nitroglycerine, a tin of gunpowder, and a secret code. Vladimir Lypinski was arrested as a German spy, eventually convicted as being a "Vatican Spy" signing papers after repeated interrogations with physical abuse. Several weeks later on July 26, 1942 he was summoned before a commissar at two o'clock in the morning. He had "confessed" and had been found guilty of espionage. The sentence was fifteen years at hard labor in Siberia. He felt guilt over giving in. The interrogations continued, and Cizek fell into black despair. Terrified, he threw himself on God, pleading his utter helplessness. Then, in a moment of blinding light, he was able to see "the grace God had been offering me all my life." He says: "I knew that I must abandon myself completely to the will of the Father and live from now on in this spirit of self-abandonment to God. And I did it. I can only describe the experience as a sense of "letting go," giving over totally my last effort or even any will to guide the reins of my own life. It is all too simply said, yet that one decision has affected every subsequent moment of my life. I have to call it a conversion. . . . It was at once a death and a resurrection.

He ends up 10 degrees north of the Arctic Circle with thieves, deserters, murderers and political prisoners. For 12 hours he shovels coal into freighters and was still dressed in light cotton summer clothes with rags for shoes; winter clothing is issued in October when it is -30. He did meet another priest and said Mass with wine made out of stolen

raisins and the paten a gold watch cover and a chalice that was a shot glass - but he was overjoyed at being able to say Mass again. He also hears confessions, performs baptisms, tends the sick and dying, gives homilies and even retreats despite shoveling coal for 15 hours straight and hauling logs out of the frozen river. He built a little thriving parish from the darkness of that Siberian gulag.

That grace would shine in his ministry. By 1947 he was a construction worker in an ore processing plant. Once every ten days, the men got a shower and turned in their old underwear for a clean set. Their other clothes were washed every three months. After work he heard confessions as the men walked around the prison yard. And once the commandant's quarters had cleared for the day, he said Mass undetected right in the offices. At times he said Mass in the hospital examination rooms. He even began giving retreats.

In 1953 returned to the mines, and in April of 1955 his sentence was up. He left prison a free man, and got permission to write his sisters in America. He remained confined to the small town of Norlisk in Sibera working in a chemical factory. But here, the grace in him continued to shine. By Easter of 1958 there were so many people for his midnight Mass there was hardly room for the converted barracks that was his church there. When the KGB found out what he was doing, they gave him 10 days to leave and never think of coming back. They put him on a plane to Krasnoyarsk, where within 2 months he had two mission parishes running. More than 800 would come for Mass; there were also baptisms and marriages. The KGB again moved him out of town where he ends up as a mechanic in another town.

In 1963, when he's finally able to visit his sister in Moscow who had come to see him, he's awoken one night by KGB officers who tell him to quit his job and be ready to leave for Moscow in 3 days. Not knowing what to expect, he's given a VIP tour of the capital and introduced to a man from the American Consulate. The agent says to the American "shall we get it over with?" The US representative had him sign a document; unknowingly he had been exchanged for a Russian spy apprehended in the United States.

He lived the rest of his life in America, working for the John XXIII Center at Fordham University by giving talks, retreats and counseling to people who came to see him until he entered eternal life on December 8, 1984.

What Fr. Walter did throughout his life was to help people answer the question "who is your God?" as he risked his life to do so. Much like the apostles who are sent in the Gospel who took nothing with them, he went off with very little, but in the process helped thousands to come to know God.

Last week, we were reminded that we were all called to be prophets as we reflected on the call of Ezekiel. This week, we are reminded that we are all called to go evangelize to the world by helping them to realize that God is there to love them and to guide them, and that He is supreme in their lives.

The problem is that is a very counter-cultural message. Communism's aim was to eliminate God because the belief was the government provides everything and government reigns supreme; even to this day the official Catholic Church is not allowed in China due to holding the pope to be supreme. But elsewhere, the message can be the the individual is supreme; that God is somehow a threat to the individual because God limits freedom. But for the Christian, we believe that God will help us attain true happiness. He created us out of love; He gives us free will but it takes time and conditioning for us to learn that true happiness can be found in God alone. As Fr. Walter wrote: "Across that threshold I had been afraid to cross, things suddenly seemed so very simple. There was but a single vision, God, who was all in all; there was but one will that directed all things, God's will. I had only to see it, to discern it in every circumstance in which I found myself, and let myself be ruled by it." That is the challenge we all have - to let ourselves be ruled by that vision of God that we hope to see one day in heaven.

This is what Paul is getting at in our second reading when he says "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavens as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world to be holy and without blemish before him. In love he destined us for adoption to himself through Jesus." The ongoing question that we need to ask is how do we respond to that love, and how do we help others to do the same?

A starting point is looking at ourselves and asking ourselves who is our God? We might all say well of course I believe in God, but is God ultimately the center of our lives? For young Walter, it wasn't about God, it was about him. He wanted to be the toughest kid on the block. And even in seminary he wanted to be the best at everything. Eventually he let go of that and surrendered, and his whole ministry was about surrender and trust. Fr. Walter wrote: "I realized God's will was not hidden somewhere 'out there' but that the situations in which I found myself were His will for me. He wanted me to accept those situations as from His hands, to let go of the reins and place myself entirely at His disposal. He was asking of me an act of total trust, allowing for no interference or restless striving on my part, no reservation, no exceptions, no areas where I could set conditions or hesitate. He was asking a complete gift of self, nothing held back. It demanded absolute faith in God's existence, providence, his concern for the minutest details, his power to sustain and protect me. It meant losing the last hidden doubt, the fear that God will not bear you up. Like the eternity between anxiety and belief when a child first lets go of all support - only to find that the water truly holds him up and he can float motionless, and totally relaxed." Trusting God is tough; so too is keeping God as our focus in life. If we are honest with ourselves, our conscience might inform us that our primary God is our ego, our money, our pride, our possessions, or being in control of others. Letting go and letting God needs to be what guides us in all we do, just like the apostles in the Gospel who do the same thing.

As we do that, we then strive go grow in holiness. As Paul says we are to be "holy and without blemish." Fr. Walter was always attentive to this. Like so many people of heroic

virtue, he was never content with just being a “pretty good” person or doing the bare minimum. When we do a regular examination of conscience, like him we can look for ways we can continually grow in virtue. We become aware of our shortcomings not to feel guilty or to downplay our progress, but to remind ourselves of the fact that we are all “works in progress” striving to grow in holiness.

And growing in that holiness, we, like Fr. Walter, like the apostles sent out in our Gospel, go out into the world. We likely won't go to Russia. But we go to our families, our workplaces, our schools and engage the world through our words and actions. When we act as a loving parent, a true friend, a compassionate listener and a person who can forgive others, we live out the faith. When we set an example for others by being being a person of service, and someone who makes Mass and prayer a priority, we can bring them to the faith. And I reflected on last week, when we take our role of being a prophet seriously and engage with others about our faith and what we believe and why, we can bring them to Christ.

In the course of my time so far at Saint Joseph's, what has struck me so much with our parish is how there are many Fr. Walter's here - people who give so freely of their time and talent and who serve, doing so not with a “I'll do this for you if you do this for me” kind of mentality, but rather because they simply want to help others grow in their faith. From those who just went down to Haiti and returned, to our volunteers who serve as ushers, catechists, lectors, money counters, funeral lunch crew people, and scores of other ministries, people here live out the whole message of Paul this week which is it's not about you, it's about God. As he writes: “In him we were also chosen, destined in accord with the purpose of the One who accomplishes all things according to the intention of his will, so that we might exist for the praise of his glory.” As Paul points out, it's not about us, it's about glorifying God and emulating Jesus who gave everything for us all out of love with no strings attached. Like Jesus, and like Father Walter, may we too give freely not to be noticed or get something back or with some string attached, but rather simply because we want to become more like Christ and make Him known to the world. Just like the people he ministered to in the USSR, people are searching for deeper meaning in life. The answer doesn't come from the government, the answer doesn't come from the ego or serving ourselves, the answer comes from the God who is love and gave everything for us all. As Saint John Paul II reminded us, a person only finds himself in the sincere gift of himself. Fr. Walter knew that profound truth, and in the process by giving everything he had, helped give thousands behind the Iron Curtain that which the government could never give them, namely peace, love and hope because it was the power of God working through him. That can only happen though when one surrenders to the will of God, and carries out his or her mission. So where's God calling you to go? Listen. Surrender. Trust. And carry out your mission. For, when we do, like Fr. Walter, we'll find that so many people found happiness and peace and the way to salvation because you showed them the way.