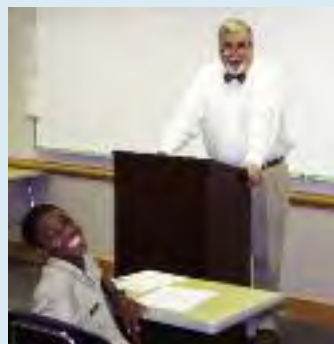




Editor’s Note: We continue our series of profiles of the Jesuits whose names appear on the stone medallions in the Traditions Courtyard. **English teacher Tim Powers** tells us of one Jesuit important to him. Powers, who is in his 28th year at Jesuit, became interested in the saints several years ago while studying medieval culture. He became intrigued by the lives of holy men and women who have faded into obscurity. Powers “sneaks in” information about the saints, especially Jesuit saints, on his vocabulary quizzes. “These saints,” he tells his students, “are even more heroic and admirable than the ones who play in the Superdome.” The choice of **Walter Cizek** was a natural for Powers, who is half Polish and who greatly admires the work the Jesuits have done in Poland since 1558. He has taught English at every grade level during his years at Jesuit. His best class, Powers says, is always the one he’s about to teach.



Walter Cizek, S.J. (1904–1984)

By Timothy Powers

Walter Cizek, one of the least known of the Jesuit heroes whose names are chiseled into the medallions that adorn the courtyard exterior of the school, was a man whose life was shaped by events he never could have foreseen while growing up in Shenandoah, Pennsylvania, in the early nineteenth hundreds.

It is entirely appropriate that Father Cizek’s medallion is nearest to Room 122, Jesuit’s “Penance Hall,” for much of his priestly ministry was spent in one of the great penance halls of the twentieth century: the Soviet Union’s Siberian gulag.

Born to Polish-American parents in 1904, Cizek spent his youth in a most unpromising manner. He was, by his own admission, a tough, a bully, a street fighter, a gang leader who skipped so much school that he had to repeat an entire year. Things got so bad that his father took him to the police station and demanded that his son be sent to a reform school. When the police dissuaded the father, saying that to do so would bring great dishonor on the family, this made a deep impression on the boy.

Not long after, Cizek stunned his parents by announcing that he wanted to become a priest. He was sent to a seminary in Michigan where he continued his tough ways. Now, however, his focus was on developing a toughness of character. He arose at 4:30 a.m. to run five miles around the lake on the seminary grounds; he swam in the lake when it was nearly frozen; he ate only bread and water during Lent; he abstained from meat for an entire year—just to see if he could do it.

Cizek always tried to do the hardest thing, and not just

physically. Baseball was the sport Cizek loved most, and he was a star on his hometown team, the Shenandoah Indians. Because he knew that giving up baseball would be a great sacrifice, he did just that. Once he entered the seminary, summer was the only time Cizek was allowed to return home to be with family and friends. One summer, just to bear the loneliness of being away from those he loved, Cizek spent his entire vacation working the fields on the seminary grounds.

It was at the seminary that Cizek read the life of St. Stanislaus Kostka and decided that he wanted to become a Jesuit. He didn’t like the idea of joining a religious order, and he especially didn’t like what he had read about the Jesuit hallmark of “perfect obedience”; but he finally decided that “since it was so hard,” joining the Jesuits was the thing to do. Without telling anyone, Cizek boarded a train for New York City, found his way to the provincial’s office, and convinced the provincial that he was destined to become a Jesuit.

Less than a year later, in 1929, Cizek heard what he believed to be a “direct call from God” to become a Russian missionary. On that day the novice master read a letter from Pope Pius XI “to all seminarians, especially our Jesuit sons,” asking for men to enter a new Russian center being started in Rome to prepare priests for

missionary work in the Soviet Union. Cizek was sent to the new center, the Russicum, where he studied theology and became the first American ordained to say Mass in the Russian Byzantine rite.

By the time Cizek was ordained, the persecution of the church in the Soviet Union was so severe that Jesuit father general Wlodomir Ledochowski decided it would be imprudent to send men into Russia; instead he sent Cizek to a mission in Albertyn, Poland, where he remained for a little more than a year.

In 1939, when the Nazis and the Soviets both invaded Poland, Albertyn landed in the Soviet sector. Cizek and two other Jesuits convinced their superior that since Russia had come to them, it was time to begin the missionary work for which they had been trained. Disguised as Polish refugees, they ended up working in a lumber yard 750 miles northeast of Moscow, saying Mass in secret in the forest and attempting to sound out the few coworkers who did not display an outright hostility to all things religious.

Shortly after the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, the secret police surrounded the barracks where Cizek lived and arrested him. In his room they found Mass wine, tooth powder, a roll of cotton, and paper on which Cizek had been teaching the alphabet to a little boy. These were identified as “gunpowder and packing for making bombs” and the “ciphers of a secret code.” Cizek was then sent to the infamous Lubyanka Prison in the heart of Moscow for interrogation as a “Vatican spy.” There he was beaten with rubber truncheons, starved, and drugged. Eventually he signed a confession and remained in solitary confinement for the duration of the war.

To break up the monotony of his daily existence—prisoners were required either to stand or walk from 5:30 in the morning until 10 at night—Cizek began to organize his day as if he were in a Jesuit house back home: he began the day with the Morning Offering, spent a solid hour in meditation, said the prayers of the Mass by heart, made a noon and evening examen, and recited three rosaries—one in Polish, one in Latin, one in Russian. At other times he would sing hymns or recite favorite poems by Wordsworth, Burns, and Shelley.

Once the war ended, Cizek was sentenced to fifteen years hard labor in the prison camps of Siberia, primarily as a construction worker or a coal miner. Throughout these years Cizek continued his priestly ministry in secret, saying Mass (often using wine made from fermented raisins), hearing confessions, even giving retreats. In the camps Cizek encountered the worst and best of humanity. There he found that force and deception were the virtues most admired. Physical violence was a way to gain mastery over others. Conscience was regarded as a sign of weakness. Murders were common. It was not unusual for prisoners to mutilate themselves to get out of work. Cizek endured beatings and often feared for his



Walter Cizek, S.J.

life. Spies were everywhere, and even some priests became informants.

But many prisoners sought God and were thankful to learn that Cizek was a priest. Cizek discovered that in the prison camps his priestly apostolate consisted mainly of being a “witness.” He later wrote that it was “not so much a matter of preaching God and talking religion to the men around you as it was a matter of living the faith that you yourself professed.” Many prisoners questioned why Cizek strove to work so hard at all the jobs he was assigned; after all, wasn’t he just helping the atheistic communists achieve their goals? Wouldn’t slipshod work or even sabotage be better? Cizek replied that for him God’s will was revealed in the situations and the people he countered each day. Labor was not a punishment “but a way of working out [his] salvation in fear and trembling.” He told the men to remember that “when God became man, he became a workingman. He worked day in and day out for some twenty years to

set us an example, to show us that routine chores are not beneath man’s dignity or even God’s dignity. Work cannot be a curse if God himself undertook it.”

Back in America, Cizek was officially listed as dead. His Jesuit colleagues assumed he had died in prison and from 1947 on had been saying Masses for the repose of his soul. However, in 1955 word reached Cizek’s family and his Jesuit brothers that he was alive. He had been freed from prison and, though not allowed to leave Siberia, had found work as an auto mechanic. In addition, though the Soviet secret police constantly harassed him and moved him from one town to another, he established mission parishes, said Mass, conducted weddings and funerals, and baptized the young.

In October 1963 the secret police unexpectedly arrived at his home and told him to pack for a trip to Moscow. No reason was given, but Cizek imagined the authorities were fed up with his religious activities and were planning to send him into exile. To his surprise, after a few days in Moscow, he was driven to an airport and turned over to an American consul in exchange for two Soviet spies. As his plane flew past the Kremlin and his Russian adventure came to an end, Cizek “slowly, carefully, made the sign of the cross” over the land that he was leaving.

Following a brief respite, Cizek began working and lecturing at the John XXIII Center for Eastern Studies at Fordham University. He also wrote two memoirs, *With God in Russia* and *He Leadeth Me*, from which much of the information for this article was gleaned. Cizek died on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception in 1984.

Of all the American Jesuits who answered Pius XI’s call to serve in Russia, Cizek is the only one who returned alive. In 1985 admirers began to petition church authorities for official recognition of his work. He has since been granted the title “Servant of God,” and his cause for canonization is currently being investigated in Rome. ■