

Sometimes in life, it can be tempting to play it safe. We become accustomed to a certain status quo, or things just being the way they are, and perhaps we don't think too much about them.

But deep down, inevitably we know that change has to be a part of our lives. There are moments when we are compelled to act, such as when we see an injustice, or something wrong in a family or situation with friends. And there are moments where we hear our conscience telling us it's time to do something different; to change as a person, or to do something new with our lives. Jesus says it best in our Gospel: "Amen, amen I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit." How true this statement is. For while change is sometimes very hard, it can also produce so much fruit when a person surrenders to the call of God; a God who shapes the heart of a person who listens to Him, and uses that person as His instrument to do amazing things.

Like many of us, at an early age, Walter Cizek was a little rough around the edges. Growing up in Shenandoah, Pennsylvania in the 1910's and 1920's, he went to a Catholic school but was known to spend more time playing hooky than being actually in school. When he was actually in school, he would pick fights just for the sheer fun of it. His father was a kind-hearted man but was so overwhelmed with his son that he took him to the police station once and asked if they could keep him there briefly in hopes his son might wake up and get the point; they declined, but his parents told him look son, you have to sort this out and stop this kind of behavior.

And then, as he became a teenager, the behavior did suddenly stop. In fact, out of the blue, he decided he wanted to become a priest. His mom said if that were the case, he'd have to be a good one.

In those days, it was common for a young man to go to a high school seminary, and Orchard Lake in Michigan is where he went. He was a great athlete, and at that point in his life his outward image of appearing tough and doing it all on his own was important to him. He'd go to the chapel late at night to pray when he should have been sleeping, not wanting to think he was too pious. He'd go through a whole Lent with eating bread and water, never telling his spiritual director that it was his idea. And when he read about the life of Saint Stanislaus Kostka, the Polish Saint of the 16th century who ran away from home and walked on foot many miles to get to the Jesuit order, he thought this was great, and so Walter himself got on a train, and went to New York where the Jesuit headquarters were. He didn't know a soul there, and asked to see the provincial, and he wouldn't leave until he was accepted as a novice. When he went home for the summer he had a fight with his dad about where to go but eventually his father relented and he went to the Hudson Seminary, and after studying in Rome was ordained in 1937.

He longed to go to Russia, knowing the persecution the Church had endured under the Communists. Initially he went to Poland, and when war broke out in 1939, he entered the Soviet Union with false identification papers and worked as an unskilled laborer until June of 1941 when the secret police arrested him as a suspected spy.

After his arrest, Fr. Cizek found himself in the infamous Lubianka Prison in Moscow, where he was interrogated as a “Vatican spy” and sentenced to 15 years of hard labor in Siberia. Although forced to work in a Gulag coal mine, Fr. Cizek found ways to hear confessions and say Mass. He would later say in an interview “I should have died 20 different times in the Soviet Union, but God had something for me to do.”

Calling the treatment harsh would be an understatement. In one incident, he and his fellow prisoners were crammed into the hold of a ship steaming upriver to the work camps in Siberia. Some prisoners rioted due to the poor conditions, and they were killed by the guards.

In 1955, Fr. Cizek’s sentence ended early since he had surpassed his work quotas, and he was freed from the labor camps but forced to live in the Gulag city of Norilsk, where he worked in a chemical factory. Happily, after decades of being presumed dead, Fr. Cizek was finally allowed to write to family members in the United States. In Norilsk, Fr. Cizek and other priests ministered to a growing parish but, before too long, the KGB threatened to arrest him if he continued his ministry. Missioned to another city, the KGB quickly shut him down again.

Then, in 1963, Fr. Cizek learned he was going home. In a release negotiated by President John F. Kennedy, he and an American student were returned to the United States in exchange for two Soviet agents. Following his return, Fr. Cizek worked at the John XXIII Center at Fordham University (now the Center for Eastern Christian Studies at the University of Scranton in Pennsylvania), until his death in 1984. Those who knew him here in the United States described him as cheerful and upbeat and good-natured; a man of prayer who helped bring people closer to God.

A religious sister, Mother Marija, had the privilege of speaking with Father Cizek over the phone the night before he died. Although physically in bad shape, he eagerly offered her his full attention. She recalled three things he told her: 1) “If you want to have peace when you die, try to do God’s will every day.” Or, as he’d always say, “Give God your lousy best.” 2) Realize the great value of confession. 3) “Stay away from evil; leave evil to God” — as in let God take care of evil.

But despite all this suffering in his life, in his time here he helped keep hope alive. And he also grew as a person. His sense of self-sufficiency had been stripped away; he learned that if he trusted God, God would do everything for him. And in part because of what he did for others, the faith was handed down in Russia. When churches were opened again, and priests gradually returned, what they found was in many cases the faith was kept alive through the family passing it on; through the grandparents telling their children and grandchildren about Christianity. In one small parish in the city of Purim for instance, which closed in 1936 before re-opening in 1995, the bishop who came was shown the tomb of a priest in the 19th century who had been there. The faithful would gather on Sundays at that tomb and pray and even say their sins. Through both the passing on of the faith in homes, and the sacrifices of priests like Fr.

Ciszek, today the Catholic faith in Russia is growing. No longer underground, some churches once destroyed are now being rebuilt.

What his life goes to show you is the truth of the statement of our Lord: “unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit.” Fr. Walter knew God was calling Him to something big; but in the process he had to die to himself, to trust, and to go on the adventure to which God had called him. The challenge for you and me is to do the same.

In the first reading, God tells the people that “I will place my law within them and write it upon their hearts.” God has a covenant with us. But when we think about that, we think about how God wants to be close to us, and speak to us. Sure, one can memorize the rules and regulations. And that’s part of this; do this; don’t do that. But just as when we are growing up we hopefully go from following the rules so we won’t get in trouble to instead honoring our parents because we love them, the same is true with God. When we fall in love with God, we listen to Him and come to know Him and this also means listening to His plan for us.

This isn’t easy. Sometimes we can cling to our so-called “safe space.” The other day at daily Mass I used the example of how as a child I was so scared of swimming at first I wouldn’t want to leave the safety of the shallow end of the pool; but then when I realized the instructor was in deeper water as were the other kids who were with her who had flotation devices and were having fun in the water, I let go and low and behold it wasn’t all that bad. It certainly was much more fun in future summers to jump right in and have a good time. But this required a change. And God wants us to do greater things than just swim. He has a plan for us. So how do we discern and execute that plan?

For one, it means being shaped by God. Sometimes this can be painful. But when we have pain in our spiritual life, God will create a clean heart in us; one that is changed, shaped and molded by God just as a potter creates something beautiful out of mishapen clay. God is able to shape us into the person He desires us to be. But we also have to open the door; it’s not forced upon us. Fr. Walter, through his experience, went from thinking I have to do this all on my own to relying on God and others too. So how about us? Do we listen to the voice of God or resist? Listening to God means being open to where He wants to take us. The world might tell us to play it safe, to cling to what we know - but when we love, we are willing to let God take the wheel. It might be a dangerous journey at times, but when we let God form us and take us where we are meant to go, what amazing things can happen. Think of Walter going off to New York and then to Russia. Maybe you think back to the day of your engagement and then wedding. Or a new chapter that began in your life. When we look back at the start we might remember the emotions, the “what ifs” that ran through our mind, but what great things God can do for us if only we open ourselves and listen to His voice.

Second, this journey can at times be painful. As I’ve used the example before, think of a dejected Frodo the hobbit who wants to give up, when Sam in the Return of the King says there’s some things worth fighting for. Fr. Ciszek suffered greatly, but in the

process he helped keep faith and hope alive in people, and helped inspire others to come to the faith. Are we willing to suffer when God is forming us, having the humility to be open to change and recognizing that we are all works in progress? How about on our vocation? As a priest, I have to be willing to be hated if I am to live out my vocation; hated sometimes for the message of the universal Church; or even hated by people in a parish when leading through changes. So how about you? Are you willing to speak up for the faith? Are you willing to deal with the challenges of a marriage or being a parent? Are you willing to sacrifice to help others? Saying “yes” to God as Fr. Cizek found may mean a lengthy road, but again, when we trust in God He will see us to the end of it.

Lastly, we evangelize like Fr. Cizek. Notice the detail that some Greeks are interested in learning about Jesus. Philip and Andrew evangelized to them, and they use their personal relationship with them in order to encounter Jesus; in the same way the people in the gulag and the labor camp encountered Christ through Fr. Cizek. As our lives are transformed by God’s love, we can use our own relationship with Christ to help others “come and see” Jesus as well; we do this through praying with others, inviting them to Mass, not being afraid to talk about our faith or have an actual argument or discussion, and through our actions of love and mercy. What an incredible gift we can give when we help others come to find Jesus.

Fear can be a powerful thing. Maybe you’re afraid to return to Mass even if you’ve got a Covid shot or to start living life again, worried about death and disease to a point where it becomes a paranoia. Maybe you are afraid to talk about your faith because you might be cancelled by cancel culture. Maybe you are afraid to confront someone in your family or a friend who’s losing their way. Maybe you’re afraid to take the job offer you know deep down you really want. Maybe you’re afraid of being rejected which is preventing you from speaking your mind, or pursuing a relationship with someone. There is a rational healthy fear. But then there is the fear that results in someone perpetually wanting to play it safe. The thing of it is, from dust we came and to dust we shall return. We cannot determine when we’ll die. But we can determine how we live, and God has a plan for you. So listen to what He’s telling you. Be willing to leave the perceived safety of your shire and go on the grand adventure with God. Take some risks. Because when you do, what amazing things can happen. Who would have thunk it, a rebel child from Shenandoah, Pennsylvania, helping to keep the faith alive in the USSR who’s presence there is felt to this day. Doing it entailed letting go and letting God. So let us do the same thing, because when we do He’ll lead us to great places, and working with Him like Fr. Cizek, we can help lead so many people to heaven, letting God’s mercy transform our hearts so we can do the same for one another.