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Ex-prisoners' testimonies of faith

Fr Adam Ziemba, *A Piece of Bread*, Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum 2017:

What kept them going was not only their will to live, but also their love for God and the country: for God, because without their faith they would have ended their misery by throwing themselves against the wires long ago; for the country, because they believed they might still be useful to Poland. They went calmly now, emaciated and maltreated, but with the defiance always seething inside them; time and again, it sent sparks to their seemingly lifeless eyes and kindled fires of inexhaustible spiritual strength that no-one and nothing could stifle.

When I look back at the Oświęcim period from the perspective of freedom, when I remember my friends who departed for ever and those who have survived like me, the thin string with ten small knots becomes to me a lifeline thrown to people drowning in the stormy sea of life: our daily rosary in the camp.

Fr Konrad Szweda, *Kwiaty na Golgotcie*, Poznań – Warszawa 1982:

The more weeds of evil were sowed by the enemy, the more powerfully God sowed wheat seeds of good through His chosen prisoners, and thus love conquered hate. (...) God tried His servants in the fire of oppression and hardship. He wanted to test the ore of their hearts, the measure of their love, the extent of their dedication. Many strived to keep faith with their Lord to the last, not unlike miserable Job: “Lord, Thou gave, and Thou hast taken away, blessed be Thy name” (Job 1:21–22). Amidst this sea of cruelty, there evolved indomitable fortitude, the tremendous heroism of serving one’s neighbour, the renouncing of things once treated as important, the desire for a new world of love and kindness to arise from the sacrifice. Where there was no order based on love, terror spread, chaos of human urges reigned, animal instincts broke out. Where thought and mind were deprived of the reviving power of love, the all-consuming impulse to pull through prevailed. The blind force overwhelmed everything and blocked all reason.

Fr Jan Skarbek (a priest of the Oświęcim parish who had helped the inmates during the war, as cited in S. Nowak, *Lekarz z Auschwitz*, Warszawa 2020):

Jesus Christ was present in Auschwitz, too, as He was present in every German death camp. He, too, was killed by the German murderers with a poisonous injection or with gas, and was burned in the crematorium.

Fr Emil Seroka, in: *Cudem ocaleni. Wspomnienia z kacetów*, London 1981:

When everyone thought Christ had been entombed, He came to life through resurrection. When the Catacomb Church was persecuted, she grew the most splendidly and soon triumphed. So we ought to have no doubt either, despite the deprivation, oppression and propaganda, because we, too, are on our way to victory and resurrection, following the example of Christ.

Fr Piotr gazes at the first window of the chapel [the chapel in Dachau, inaccessible to Polish priests] and whispers an impromptu prayer: “Lord Jesus, I cannot come to You, I cannot receive You in Holy Communion. You have died for everyone and You want to save everyone; come to me, please, come to me in Holy Communion!” He remembered the book *The Living Flame of Love* by St John of the Cross, where he had found the words (3.28) that moved him deeply, a wise lesson for a faithful soul. He cherished them, pondered and repeated them, as they always comforted him and brought him light in the darkness: *if anyone is seeking God, the Beloved is seeking that person much more.* (...) On their way to the Supper of the Lord, those holy men encountered numerous obstacles that seemed unsurmountable. There was no chalice, no vestments, no appropriate bread or wine. But there was love, smartness and the unquenchable desire to come nearer to the Beloved. (...) They carved a chalice out of wood and put the upper part of a wine glass inside it.

Zofia Posmysz, *The Christ from Auschwitz*, Oświęcim 2014 (comments on a small medallion with an image of Christ, a gift from a fellow prisoner):

I was happy. I was happy there, in Auschwitz. In the evenings, after the *Lagerruhe* was sounded, I took my treasure out from its hiding place behind a rafter and, moving my finger over the piece of metal like a blind person, I recalled the face of the Crucified to my memory’s eye and prayed – not in supplication, but in thanksgiving. I thanked Him for the feeling of kinship, an unusual feeling, close to the ecstasy (God, forgive me!) known to saints. Only many years later, at university, did I come across the notion of illuminationism, a spiritual experience of enlightenment deriving from another dimension, a supernatural one. Yes, this is what it was.

Jadwiga Apostol-Staniszevska, in: S. Kłodziński, J. Masłowski, „Postawy ideowe więźniów w Oświęcimiu”, *Przegląd Lekarski – Oświęcim*, vol. 46, 1 (1989):

The God I knew from altars, his face radiating justice and mercy, was there no more. The well-worn words of prayer were there no more. What remained was belief in the powerful Creator watching over the balance in his universe, where human beings are so small that they cannot claim special rights for themselves. They must govern their affairs on their own, according to ethical principles they have adopted. (...) It was there that my philosophy of life matured. Since then, I was to adhere to one commandment (...): “You shall love your neighbour like yourself”.

J.Z. Sochocki, in: *Cudem ocaleni*, pp. 198:

To their amusement, a German functionary from Silesia dragged a barrel, climbed on top, turned toward the front of the wretched group and, using a thick piece of wood, started to conduct them in chanting the Our Father. Frenzied screams *Vorwärts! Schnell! Vorwärts!* came from all sides, while heavy blows of clubs rained on the bare heads and swollen backs. The Lord’s Prayer, hesitant and weak at first, interrupted by wild shouts of the oppressors, gathered strength, grew louder and louder, drowning out the sneers and mockery. It sounded like a bell echoed by the hill, rising imploringly to heaven, falling down mournfully onto the valleys. Hour after hour, ceaselessly, without respite, they said the most beautiful prayer of worship, supplication and forgiveness.

“Forgive... forgive them too? No, never! I will not forgive! I cannot! Must not!... The lips formed the words *as we forgive them that trespass against us*, but the heart protested, asking for vengeance, for punishment deserved by those *that trespass against us* and cannot be forgiven...”. A little further we read, though: “Forgive us our trespasses, for who is without them?... and forgive them that trespass against us... You shall be their judge – theirs and ours. Your justice is upon all.” (Ibidem, p. 198–199).

“The Scrouging of Jesus. The Lord’s body suffered so much for our sake. Let us offer our hardships as atonement for our trespasses and for those who persecute us.” (Ibidem, p. 179).