



Father George Calciu: Priest, Prisoner and Confessor of the Faith

Father George Calciu, a priest of the Romanian Orthodox Church, died on November 21, 2006 in Alexandria, Virginia of pancreatic cancer at the age of 80. I met him only once, over a weekend in Seattle, now nearly two decades ago, but he had a profound impact on my understanding of the priesthood and the witness a priest must give to the Truth of the crucified Christ. He spent 21 of his 80 years in prison in Romania because of his faith in Christ. Born in 1925, he studied medicine in Bucharest for two years, 1946-1948, but was expelled from the Faculty of Medicine and imprisoned by the communist authorities because of his deep religious convictions and his willingness to speak out against the emerging totalitarianism taking hold in Romania. "We protested atheism, the collectivization of the means of production and the destruction of the intelligentsia," he told *The Washington Post* in a 1989 interview. Sent to prison for "re-education" – a common tactic used by the communist regime in an attempt to erase Christianity from the youth of the country – he remained in prison for 16 years, until finally being released in a general amnesty issued by the government in 1964.

What were these years like? First, a team of guards and "experienced" prisoners would beat the incoming prisoners and kill one or two, whoever appeared to be a potential leader. Next, the new prisoners were required to "unmask" – the prisoners were required, under torture, to verbally renounce everything they believed about God. Third, prisoners were forced to denounce everyone they knew, including their family. The abuse never ceased, not even in one's cell, and every imaginable torture was employed. Last, in order to show that they had been "re-educated" and become "the communist man," the prisoners were required to join in the ranks of the torturers and assist in the "re-

education" of new prisoners. "It was during this fourth part that the majority of us tried to kill ourselves," Father George confessed.

During these 16 years in prison, he came to admire the priests who were jailed with him and his faith, in spite of the brutality of his surroundings, grew and deepened. It was in the Pitesti Prison that he came to the realization that he was called to the priesthood. "The priests were better prepared than we were. They knew what suffering was. They were prepared for it. They brought forgiveness to us, so to speak. I decided to dedicate the remaining years of my life to God and to become a priest."

After his release from prison, he married his wife, Andrea, in 1965. Initially forbidden by the government to study theology, he instead studied at the Faculty of Philosophy and Literature for four years and received a degree in French. Eventually, he was allowed to pursue a doctorate in theology with the blessings of Justinian, then the Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church. "Justinian was amazing," Father Calciu once said. "He was very strong in his stand against the political administration, very strong. He made it possible for some of us to study theology."

Father Calciu was ordained to the priesthood in January, 1973 at the age of 48. After receiving his degree in theology, he was appointed by Patriarch Justinian as a professor at the Theological Seminary in Bucharest where he taught French and New Testament studies. He remained vocal in his criticism of the atheistic communist system, condemning the destruction of churches and widespread violation of human rights under the Ceausescu regime. "I declared communism, together with Marxism and materialism, to be a religion, a philosophy of hopelessness and despair, because a regime that demolishes churches to build taverns is a regime that has lost the notion of its true mission." Ceausescu tolerated his pro-Christian, anti-Marxist sermons for the next few years, but following the death of Patriarch Justinian in 1977, conditions for the church worsened as the state tightened its control.

In the winter of 1978, Father Calciu announced plans for a series of 7 sermons during Lent, specifically addressing young people about religious faith. In these sermons, with as many as 600 people present, he contrasted what he called "the fullness of the Gospel life" to "the lies of materialism as a doctrine and the communist ideology of hatred." Because of these sermons "Ceausescu saw me as his personal enemy," Father Calciu later recalled. He was abruptly dismissed from the seminary for preaching these sermons in 1979, arrested, tried and sentenced to 10 years in prison. Severely mistreated, often beaten and placed in solitary confinement for months at a time, he was finally released by the Romanian government in 1984 under pressure from international political and religious leaders (Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher and Pope John Paul II) and was forced to leave Romania in 1985. He immigrated to the United States and eventually settled in Virginia with his wife and son, Andrei, where he became the pastor of Holy Cross Romanian Orthodox Church.

What was his life like during this second imprisonment? Below is an excerpt from an interview he once gave about those years: "I was completely isolated in my cell. I knew

nothing about my family. I was surrounded only by the hatred of the guards. Twice a day I was walked to the restroom to empty the *tineta* (a wooden or clay bowl which served as a latrine bucket). Those walks were the worst torture I experienced. I was insulted, hit and sometimes beaten; it happened that the contents of the *tineta* spilled onto the concrete and I was then forced to clean it up with my bare hands.

During my imprisonment I served the Holy Liturgy every Sunday and Church holiday from memory. At first the guards insulted me and beat me to make me give it up. I held fast and at last they left me alone. To their way of thinking I was crazy, but my craziness was the kind spoken of by Saint Paul: "For the preaching of the cross is to those that are perishing, foolishness; but unto us who are saved, it is the power of God. (1 Corinthians. 1: 18). It was one Sunday and I was isolated. It was one of the days without food and I couldn't serve the Divine Liturgy because I had no bread. The Orthodox Liturgy is celebrated with bread and wine, and the central moment is then when the Holy Spirit descends and transforms bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ in a real though invisible way. In prison we had no wine, but we had bread and through necessity because of these extreme circumstances, I felt my service was complete.

On that Sunday I asked the Lord to help me forget my sadness at the impossibility of serving the Holy Liturgy for lack of bread. Nevertheless, a thought came to me: to ask the guard for some bread. The most evil of the guards was on duty and I knew that my request would make him angry; he would insult me and he would ruin the peace I had in my soul for that holy day. But the thought persisted and grew so strong that I knocked on the iron door of the cell. A few minutes later the door was violently opened and the furious guard asked me: what was the matter? I asked him for a piece of bread, no more than an ounce, to use for serving the Holy Liturgy. My request seemed absurd to him; it was so unexpected that his mouth dropped open in amazement. He left slamming the door as violently as he had opened it. Many other hungry prisoners asked him for bread, but I was the first to ask for bread in order to serve the Divine Liturgy. I regretted my impulse, apprehensive about what would happen next.

Twenty minutes later the door of my cell opened half-way and quietly the guard gave me the ration for a whole day: four ounces of bread. He shut the door as quietly as he had opened it. And if I had not been holding the bread I would have thought that it was all an illusion. The Holy Liturgy I celebrated with that bread was the most profound and most sublime Holy Liturgy I have ever experienced. The service was two hours long and the guard did not disturb or insult me as at other times. Later, after I had finished the Liturgy and the fragrance of the prayer was still in my cell, the door opened quietly and the guard whispered: "Father, don't tell anyone I gave you bread, or you'll ruin me." I responded: "How could I tell this to anybody, mister first sergeant? You acted as an angel of God because the bread you gave me became the Body of Christ and your deed is now recorded in eternity." Without answering, he quietly shut the door, looking at me until the last moment. After that he never insulted me and during his eight hours of duty I had the most peaceful time of my imprisonment.

I have related this double aspect of my confinement--the suffering and the divine consolation--to make you understand that God secretly balances our lives. If we have God we shall never collapse from the pain of this world. During our most atrocious suffering we suddenly discover oases of light and sacred joy. If the world oppresses us, then Jesus comforts us; if we are sad, our joy is Jesus."

May his memory be eternal!

