



Abbaye Saint-Joseph de Clairval

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Our Lady of Mount Carmel

Dear Friend of Saint Joseph Abbey,

“FOR the ‘poor Christians’ that basically we all are, the martyrs inspire us to live the Gospel seriously and in its entirety, facing with courage the small and great sacrifices which the Christian life, lived in fidelity to JESUS’ words and example, normally entails. Martyrs are the most authentic imitators of JESUS in His passion and His death,” stated Cardinal Saraiva Martins (October 29, 2005). He continued, “This is why the Church has always in every age ... honored their memory and proposed them as examples for Christians to imitate.” Blessed Sister Zdenka Schelingová is a martyr Pope John Paul II presented to us as a “radiant example of faithfulness in times of harsh and ruthless religious persecution” (September 14, 2003).

Cecilia Schelingová was born on Christmas Day 1916, the tenth child in a peasant family, in Krivá, Slovakia, at the time part of the Austro-Hungarian empire. Her village was in a magnificent mountainous region with a deeply Catholic population. At the end of the First World War, Slovakia was joined to Bohemia and Moravia to form Czechoslovakia. In 1929, at the parish priest’s request, Sisters of the Holy Cross from Ingenbohl (Switzerland) came to the village of Krivá to teach children. The level of instruction given by the Sisters was remarkable. They also provided generous care to the sick and introduced new agricultural methods. Thanks to their devotion, harmony reigned in the village.

Of a delicate and sensitive constitution, Cecilia nevertheless possessed a combative temperament. Lively and intelligent, she could lead her friends into mischief. Once she got an idea, she didn’t think about the consequences... One day, at her instigation, the students in her class raised the chair of a short schoolteacher so high that when he sat down in it, it toppled over and he fell off, to the great delight of the children. Cecilia learned easily. During tests she would secretly help those nearby. Nevertheless, fascinated by the ordered life of the nuns who taught her, she asked, at the age of fifteen, to enter the Congregation. The Sisters of the Holy Cross do all sorts of charitable works: children’s homes, schools, clinics, sanatoriums, care for the elderly and the marginalized... They have their own centers of formation. After four years of studies, Cecilia obtained her nursing degree, and on January 30, 1937, she made her first vows. She was given the typically Slavic name Sister Zdenka, which can be translated “Sidonia.”

In 1939, the Czech portion of the country was annexed to the German Reich and Slovakia became a

separate satellite state of Germany. Until 1942, Sister Zdenka devoted herself to work in a hospital in the middle of eastern Slovakia. She was then called to the public hospital in Bratislava. Conscientious, endowed with an innate sense of order and cleanliness, as well as a keen sensitivity that enabled her to understand the sick, she won the affection and appreciation of doctors and patients alike. Prayer was the soul of her life: “In my hospital service,” she said, “I go from the altar of God to the altar of my work... I’m not afraid of anything and I try to undertake everything with joy. I proclaim the Gospel more by example than by words, just like Christ, Who manifested Himself through the witness of His life.”

Fleeing to the West

In 1945, Czechoslovakia was reunited, but at the end of February 1948, the Soviets imposed Communism on it. Industry and private property were nationalized. Agrarian reform dispossessed the Church. Most newspapers were shut down. In April 1949, a commission was created to systematically suppress the Catholic Church. In 1950, the monasteries and convents were closed on the false pretext that they were centers of revolt against the democracy of the people. Nuns working in hospitals could temporarily stay on, due to a shortage of qualified replacements. Many priests, seminarians, and religious tried to flee to the West, but there was no legal way to leave. Any aid given to someone trying to flee was considered treason, resulting in the severest punishment.

A priest, Father Sandtner, who had unsuccessfully tried to escape, was taken, gravely ill, to the hospital in Bratislava. Sister Zdenka took special care of him. In spite of the fact that it was absolutely forbidden, he

celebrated Mass in her presence in a small room. When his condition improved, it was expected that he would return to prison, but the Sister managed to prolong his stay in the hospital. Sister Zdenka's attitude gave rise to a series of increasingly sharp confrontations with the regime in place. In 1951, a very active priest, Stefan Kostial, was imprisoned and tortured for having attempted to flee the country. Completely exhausted, he was taken to the hospital in Bratislava where Sister Zdenka showed herself full of concern for him. Having regained some strength, he was to appear in court to be sentenced, on February 20, 1952. Sister Zdenka then made contact with people who could help him escape. The night of the 19th, she prepared tea for the guard and put a sleeping pill in it. Stefan Kostial managed to escape. A few days later, another attempt to help some other priests escape failed.

It's my turn!

On February 29, the police raided the hospital. A witness related, "The police searched the hospital. A nun was arrested before our eyes. Seeing this scene, Sister Zdenka exclaimed, 'Next time, it's my turn!' She called me over and begged me to take and hide some documents she had on her... As soon as I left the building, the police asked me where Sister Zdenka was. She was hurriedly gathering some toiletries together before she was found... They finally found her and took her along with the other Sisters." It was later learned that the truck driver who had taken part in the priests' escape was a spy for the State, charged in particular with spying on, and informing against, the women.

Sister Zdenka wrote, "Do not be afraid to suffer. God always gives the necessary strength and courage. I believe always in His grace. Nothing will shake me, not the storm nor the menacing clouds. If they come, it will be for a short time, and they will only reinforce my confidence and my certainty." In beatifying her, Pope John Paul II said, in the same vein, "The Cross is planted in the earth and would seem to extend its roots in human malice, but it reaches up, pointing as it were to the heavens, pointing to the goodness of God. By means of the Cross of Christ, the Evil One has been defeated, death is overcome, life is given to us, hope is restored, light is imparted." Sister Zdenka faced this harsh experience. The State police wanted to wring from her details about the escapes, above all the names of the accomplices, but she revealed nothing. She stated later, "They wanted to make me confess untrue and falsified facts." Faced with her absolute refusal to lie, the guards submitted her several times to the torture of asphyxiation. "This torture would come to an end when, completely worn out, I was on the point of passing out," she later said. "Then they would put a pair of dark glasses on me and drag me through the corridors of the prison, to a dark cell in

solitary confinement... When I regained consciousness, I looked all around me for something to slide under my aching head. Since there was nothing, I took off my shoes and used them for a pillow. In any case, they were softer than the cement floor."

Love of the truth, and discretion

In jail because of her charity toward priests, Sister Zdenka probably could have avoided many sufferings by agreeing to tell some lies or inform on others, but she always refused. The Old Testament states that God is the source of all truth. His Word is truth (cf. Prov. 8 :7, 2 Sam. 7 :28). In JESUS CHRIST, God's truth is manifested in its entirety. He *is the Truth* (Jn. 14 :6). JESUS taught His disciples to love the truth : *Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'* (Mt. 5 :37). As a result, the *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us : "Every person is called to sincerity and truthfulness in acting and speaking. Everyone has the duty to seek the truth, to adhere to it and to order one's whole life in accordance with its demands. In JESUS CHRIST the whole of God's truth has been made manifest. He is 'the truth.' Those who follow him live in the Spirit of truth and guard against duplicity, dissimulation and hypocrisy." (no. 521). The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* specifies, "The right to the communication of the truth is not unconditional. Everyone must conform his life to the Gospel precept of fraternal love. This requires us in concrete situations to judge whether or not it is appropriate to reveal the truth to someone who asks for it. Charity and respect for the truth should dictate the response to every request for information or communication. The good and safety of others, respect for privacy, and the common good are sufficient reasons for being silent about what ought not to be known or for making use of a discreet language. The duty to avoid scandal often commands strict discretion. No one is bound to reveal the truth to someone who does not have the right to know it" (nos. 2488-2489).

Faithful to the truth, Sister Zdenka was subjected to more torture sessions, in which her entire body was beaten. Only the conviction that God was protecting her gave her the strength to endure these sufferings. "Since the martyrs are poor and humble people who spent their lives in works of charity and suffered and died forgiving their executioners, we find ourselves face to face with a reality beyond the human, that forces us to understand that God alone can grant the grace and strength of martyrdom. Thus, the Christian martyr is a sign, more eloquent than ever, of God's action present in human history" (Cardinal Martins). During the entire pre-trial period, Sister Zdenka was confined to a windowless cell, alone, sitting, shivering from the cold. "I no longer knew," she said, "if it was day or night, and I had no idea how long this isolation would last.

After what seemed like forever, I was suddenly transferred to another cell. There, they gave me something to eat and drink—in front of the judges, I had to look better!”

On June 17, 1952, she appeared before the court in Bratislava for collaborating in the attempted escape of six Roman Catholic priests. Seated on the defendant's bench, Sister Zdenka seemed to have aged several years. Suffering and fear were written on her face. The court sentenced her to twelve years in prison for high treason. She was also accused of being “Enemy Number One” of the peoples' democracy. Under the eye of a member of the national security, she signed the following declaration: “I am aware of the accusations and the conclusion of the trial. I do not believe myself guilty. I acknowledge the acts that are attributed to me, but I deny the charge of high treason. The warden had spread the news that the priests would be deported to Siberia and put to death. I was deeply distressed and I wanted to save them. It was out of pure compassion that I made the decision to help them escape. I was too naïve in believing the warden's words. But this does not make me an enemy of the peoples' democracy.”

Deep lack of understanding

Sister Zdenka was incarcerated in the prison in Rimavská Sobota. There, the prisoners were watched so that no friendship might form between them. The conditions there were deplorable—the walls gray and damp, the bars rusted and the corridors smelling of mildew. Sister Zdenka compared the guards and the staff to robots. She felt truly alone, and all the more misunderstood because some of her fellow Sisters had interpreted her charitable acts toward the escapees as disobedience to the ecclesiastical superiors, who had given strict orders not to provoke the government, so as not to attract even more hatred and problems. When she learned of this criticism, Sister Zdenka was deeply hurt.

A young woman, Apolónia Galis, who would become a nun of the Holy Cross and die at the age of 78 on June 21, 2003, visited her in prison and secretly brought her cakes to which she had added vitamins. She recounted, “Sister Zdenka, pale and thin, was seated behind a large table. A guard was stationed behind her and closely watched our every move.” In a letter sent in secret, the Sister let out a veritable cry of despair; a call for help that her living conditions might be improved and she might be given medical care while she was in prison. Worried sick, Sister Zdenka's mother and younger brother decided to visit her. They were allowed to enter, but it was made clear to them that they could not show any feeling or emotion, or else the meeting would be cut short.

After a year and a half of imprisonment, Sister Zdenka was transferred to the prison ward of the Prague hospital, where she was operated on for a cancerous tumor in her breast. After the surgery, Helena Korda, a political prisoner who had recently undergone an operation for a herniated disc caused by the forced labor imposed on her in a concentration camp, agreed to take care of Sister Zdenka. For a long time she watched the Sister who was still sleeping, and felt an inexplicable peace that radiated from the sick woman. All of a sudden, the patient opened her eyes. Helena had never seen eyes so beautiful, bright, and clear, yet at the same time laden with sadness and suffering. An inexpressible closeness formed between the two women; but Sister Zdenka could not speak at great length because it made her sufferings unbearable.

A spray of white roses

The cell she occupied was unheated; the food was very insufficient. She was given no therapy or sedatives after the operation. Nevertheless, she hung on to life. One morning, Helena heard her say, “Whenever I can see the sun through the bars of my window, it is a joy for me.” She spoke often about her childhood and wanted to return to the village of her birth, to see her family again, and especially her mother. After three weeks, an order arrived like a thunderclap. The guard told the Sister, “You are going to Brno!” Nothing could be done. Their hearts broken, the two friends fell into one another's arms, then Sister Zdenka regained her self-control: “We mustn't cry... You will be freed, while as for me, it's over. I have a feeling that one day, you will come to my tomb and leave a spray of white roses there. I love them so much!” They would never see each other again here below. Helena would regain her freedom in 1960 and would go to leave a large spray of white roses on her friend's tomb.

In Brno, where Sister Zdenka was transferred, the prisoners communicated with each other in Morse code. The head of the prison decided to make the Sister a spy—he asked her to intercept the messages and relay them to him. When she refused, she was sent to an even more terrible prison, in Pardubice, in Bohemia. There, she was put in solitary confinement in a cell without a bed, and fed the minimum possible that would keep her from dying. Apolónia Galis managed to come visit her in this place: “Everything was bleak,” she would testify. “Between these walls, I myself felt overcome with fear and, on the way home, I began to cry bitterly. I had hoped to be able to exchange a few words with Sister Zdenka, but it was impossible.... I could only see my friend's sickly face. She was very ill; you could see it a mile away. Her look begged me to do whatever it took to free her, which would have been very expensive, and

neither I nor her family had the means. So she had to hold out for eleven long months.”

Yet, the State did not want prisoners dying in custody and being considered martyrs. Since Sister Zdenka's condition had become incurable, she was given her freedom on April 15, 1955. A nun who had been imprisoned like her, and then freed, welcomed her into her home, but she soon made it clear to Sister Zdenka that they could not remain together. So as not to compromise this Sister's life, she went to Bratislava, and introduced herself to the Superior of the convent, at the public hospital. But the Superior feared that her presence would create problems, and Sister Zdenka had to leave again. She understood the Superior's reasons, but thus being shunted aside deeply wounded her nonetheless. In Trnava, where she arrived, exhausted, in the company of Apolónia Galis, a new disappointment awaited her—the Sisters no longer wanted to receive her into the community.

Apolónia took Sister Zdenka into her home. But one week later, she had to be hospitalized. She had cancerous metastases in both of her lungs. Apolónia visited her often and marveled at her serenity and her heroic patience in enduring the respiratory insufficiency that oppressed her. One day, she found her in tears—she wanted to know what had become of the priest she had helped escape. But she experienced immense joy at seeing her mother again, who had come from Krivá. Sensing her imminent death, Sister Zdenka prayed: “My God, I come to You with a humble and repentant heart. My cold, stiff feet remind me that my earthly pilgrimage is coming to its end. My hands are weak and trembling, my eyes are full of anguish, and my gaze is dim. If my soul is troubled by deceptive phantoms, distressed by agony, and troubled by the memory of all I have failed to do or done badly; if I must fight the angel of darkness who hides Your goodness and fills my soul

with fear, have pity on me and, if I cry, accept my tears as a sign of repentance. And at the end, when my soul is before You and for the first time I see Your majesty, have mercy on me.”

At dawn on Sunday, July 31, 1955, Sister Zdenka rendered her soul to God, after having received Holy Communion. Her body rests today in the cemetery in Podunajské-Biskupice, in the burial vault of the Sisters of the Holy Cross. Fifteen years after her death, Sister Zdenka would be cleared by the Slovak Socialist Republic's Court of Justice. “The sentence of high treason was not justified,” state the minutes of April 6, 1970. “The actions carried out presented no danger to Society and demanded no punitive intervention. In addition, it would have been possible for agents of the security police to prevent these escapes instead of provoking them.” The president of the senate who had signed Sister Zdenka's sentence ended up converting and bitterly regretting the merciless convictions he had approved, above all the Sister's.

The victory of truth

Sister Zdenka was granted an even more glorious triumph during her beatification. By it, the Church showed that her sufferings and death were a victory. “Saint Augustine said, ‘Non vincit nisi veritas’ (The truth alone triumphs). Thus, man does not triumph over man, nor persecutors over their victims, despite appearances. In the case of Christian martyrs, in the end it is truth that prevails over error, for as the Holy Doctor of Hippo concluded: ‘Victoria veritatis est caritas’, that is, the victory of truth is charity (*Sermon 358, 11*)... The Christian martyr clearly proclaims that God, the person of JESUS CHRIST, faith in Him and fidelity to His Gospel are the highest values of human life, to the point that for them one should sacrifice even life itself” (Cardinal Martins).

May the Cross encountered in the reality of our daily lives be for us the path which leads to life, a source of strength and hope!

Dom Antoine Marie
o.r.l.

P. S. This monthly letter is free of charge. We gratefully accept the addresses of other persons who may enjoy receiving it.

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