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From Revolt to Spiritual Consciousness: The Understanding of Suffering in Romanian Communist Prisons

Ortodoksia 64 (2024), 81–95

DOI: 10.61560/ortodoksia.143833

Introduction

The article's focus is a discussion of Christian spirituality among political prisoners prior to and during the communist era in Romania. When the Communist Party came to power in 1946–1947, there were political prisoners in several Romanian prisons. Some belonged to right-wing nationalist organisations that officially opposed communist principles. We use testimonies from the beginning of the 1940s, more precisely from 1941–1942 until 1964, when political prisoners were released as a result of a general amnesty. To further evaluate their development from revolt to spiritual consciousness, the question of suffering is reflected on through the biblical figure of Job, whose dramatic narrative is imbued with spiritual meaning.

The interwar period in Romania experienced the rise of right-wing nationalist organisations such as the Brotherhoods of the Cross, student associations that started in the 20s.¹ Only students with a very good reputation and good academic results were accepted in these associations. The purpose of the Brotherhoods of the Cross was to form a new elite able to change the situation in the country and combat the communist influence that was beginning to spread in Europe. They pleaded for a profound change and moral renewal in society, the achievement of which was seen as possible only through education of a Christian and national character. The teenagers to whom the article

¹ Iorgovan 2014, 28–44.

refers, such as Valeriu Gafencu and Ioan Ianoșide, belonged to these Brotherhoods of the Cross. Several very well-known Romanian intellectuals of the time, such as Radu Gyr, also referred to here, and many others, also sympathised with the principles these nationalist organisations promoted, and what later became known as the Legionary Movement. The strong Christian education in these youth associations, a distinctive feature of this Romanian movement, was an attraction for those eager to seek a new ethical identity. Unfortunately, the idea of honour and its defence made its way into the principles of these organisations, creating confusion.²

Due to growing disagreement with the authorities, groups of legionaries were involved in conflict with the state on several occasions. At times the conflicts were very bloody, with victims on both sides. From September 1940 until February 1941, however, the Legionary Movement became part of the new government regime, known in Romanian history as the National Legionary State. The climax of the misunderstandings was reached in January 1941, when there was an open conflict between the leader of the government, who was supported by the army, and the legionaries. The conflict ended with the army's victory. The legionaries were forced out of the government. The movement's leaders took refuge in Germany, while many of its members were arrested and imprisoned. At the same time, the Brotherhoods of the Cross and the Legionary Movement were banned.

The communist period in Romania lasted from 1946–1947 until 1989. This period saw arrests of those who did not share the new party's ideology, including intellectuals, politicians, students, peasants, and even children.³ Additionally, the legionaries who had been imprisoned did not abandon their nationalist creed, refusing any collaboration with the new regime, and continued to be imprisoned.⁴ The testimonies of former political prisoners reflect the experience of detention in communist prisons in Romania. The number of arrests increased as the communist regime became stronger. A map of the Romanian concentration system⁵ shows more than 140 places of detention in Romania where very difficult conditions were experienced. For example, several labour camps where many people lost their lives were established to dig the Danube–Black Sea Canal. Among the most notorious prisons for torture

2 Ianoșide 2012, 33.

3 Maxim 2002, 68–69.

4 Iorgovan 2014, 30.

5 Tismăneanu 2007, 534.

were Sighet, Gherla, Aiud, and Pitesti. Forced labour camps were also set up at lead mines and in the Danube Delta. At the end of May 1948, following an order from Bucharest, there was a general triage of political prisoners. Adolescent prisoners were sent to Târgșor, university students to Pitești, former civil servants to Sighet, labourers to Gherla, and prisoners belonging to various opposition organisations, apart from the categories previously mentioned, were sent to Aiud.⁶ In 1964 political prisoners were officially released from prisons as a result of a general amnesty. The great release of political prisoners in 1964 eased the population's discontent.⁷ The pressure on those who did not share the regime's political ideas, however, continued even after 1964.

The sources used in this article are the testimonies and memoirs of prisoners published after detention. There is only one book in English, *The Saint of the Prisons* by Iorgovan Moise. The other books are in Romanian, and the parts used in the article are therefore my own translations. More precisely, in this article I will refer to the memoirs of eight political prisoners. I will briefly introduce them here and develop this presentation later in the article.

Demostene Andronescu is almost 97 years old and is the last living prison poet. In the autumn of 1948 he enrolled at the Faculty of History in Bucharest, from which he graduated in 1952. He was arrested before taking the final exam and sentenced to five years' hard labour. Released in 1955, he enrolled at the Faculty of Classical Philology in Bucharest but was rearrested and sentenced to 20 years' hard labour, being released in 1964. After his release he was followed closely by the Securitate until 1989.⁸

Valeriu Gafencu was born on 24 January 1921 in Bessarabia. While a student at the Faculty of Law in Iași, he was arrested and sentenced to 25 years' hard labour. After his trial he arrived at Aiud prison, where he would stay until 1948, when with other students he was transferred to the penitentiary in Pitesti, where he remained until the end of December 1949. Being very sick, he was transferred to Târgu Ocna prison with other terminally ill prisoners. He died on 18 February 1952.⁹

Ioan Ianolide lived between 1919 and 1986. In 1941 he was sentenced to 25 years' hard labour for participating in a prohibited organisation. He went through the prisons of Jilava, Văcărești, Aiud, and Alba Iulia. He was released on 31 July 1964 and was monitored by the communist regime until his death.¹⁰

6 Iorgovan 2014, 72.

7 Giurescu 2013, 47.

8 Andronescu 2009, 7–10.

9 Cămpineanul 2007, 257–267.

10 Bujor 2019, 254–269.

Radu Gyr was born on 2 March 1905 and died on 29 April 1975. He was a Romanian poet, playwright, essayist, journalist, and politician. For a while he was a lecturer at the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy in Bucharest. He was a laureate on several occasions – 1926, 1927, 1928, and 1939 – of the Society of Romanian Writers, the Institute for Literature, and the Romanian Academy. Arrested several times, he was released in 1964.¹¹

Fr Liviu Brânzaș was born on 16 December 1930 and died on 3 September 1998. For 13 years, until 1964, when the decree was issued to release all political prisoners, Liviu Branzaș was persecuted in several of the period's communist prisons: Oradea; Jilava; Căvnic lead mine; Gherla; and Aiud. In 1969 the young theologian Liviu Branzaș was ordained as a priest.¹²

Nicole Valery Grossu (4 July 1919 – 14 December 1996, Paris) was arrested in 1949 for her collaboration with the National Peasants' Party. It was only in 1951 that she received an administrative sentence of 24 months. She was released in 1953. After her release she married Sergiu Grossu, also a former political prisoner. In 1969 the Grossus left Romania, taking refuge in France.¹³

Fr Zosim Oancea was born on 21 July 1917 and died in 2005. He was accused of conspiracy against the regime. In February 1948 he was sentenced to ten years at Aiud. After ten years he expected to be released but was rearrested. He was finally released after 15 years.¹⁴

Nicolae Steinhardt (1912–1989) was Jewish. He earned his PhD in constitutional law in 1936, and between 1937 and 1938 he travelled to Switzerland, Austria, France, and the UK. Steinhardt was arrested in 1959 and sentenced to 12 years' hard labour for conspiring against the regime. He was baptised during detention in March 1960 by an Orthodox priest. Having been released from prison, he sought quickly to complete his conversion to Christianity, and on 14 September 1964 he received Holy Communion at Darvari Monastery. Later, in 1980, he embraced monasticism at Rohia Monastery.¹⁵

Fr Dumitru Stăniloae (1903–1993) was a prominent Orthodox figure – a professor of theology, dogmatist, philosopher, historian, journalist, and translator. Throughout his 90 years of life his reputation as the greatest theologian of the twentieth century was amplified by his work and the respect and recognition of the world's greatest academic institutions.¹⁶

11 Bujor 2019, 308–331.

12 Seiche 2010, 153–161.

13 Valery-Grossu 2002, 227–231.

14 Seiche 2010, 384–387.

15 Bujor 2019, 180–193.

16 Seiche 2010, 454–457.

Besides narratives, I refer to prisoners' poetry. The verses used are by Demostene Andronescu and Radu Gyr. Apart from some similarities there is a fundamental difference between the two types of detention literature: memoirs were written much later; poetry was created in prison. This difference results in very interesting findings in our analysis. I use the word "created" – avoiding the word "written" because poetry could not be written down in the communist prisons: writing instruments, books, and paper were forbidden, and violations were severely punished. As Răzvan Codrescu notes in the *Introduction* to his book *Reeducarea de la Aiud*,¹⁷ some poems were written in prisons with improvised means – scratched with a needle or a splinter on a piece of soap or on the wooden edge of a bed, or sewn on a shirt, for example – but as a rule poetic texts were born in the mind of the poet and memorised and spread by word of mouth by other prisoners, suffering inevitable adjustments, usually involuntary. Poems were also transmitted via Morse code to other prisoners with beats on the pipes of the heating system. Some of these poems were later reconstructed or reworked by their authors themselves, while others were preserved only in approximate and sometimes partial versions. Fewer poems were written after release, but these are nourished by the memory of the years of persecution. It is noteworthy that there are also many anonymous creations or poems of uncertain authorship.

Another important observation by Codrescu concerns the number of poets in the prisons. He remarks that an alphabetical index, though incomplete, includes 158 names and can be found in a work from 1993, *Poeți după gratii*, compiled by Constantin Aurel Dragodan. An older anthology, *Poezii din închisoare*, was compiled in exile in 1982 by Zaharia Pană. The compiler avoided giving the names of living authors to avoid creating difficulties for them and their families.¹⁸

In this article I will focus on some specifics of the concentration camp experiences as they are presented in the prison literature. We will see that the authors do not identify their experiences in the same way, and they do not use the same language. For example, some have a rich poetic spirit, others a poorer one. Some speak from a pastoral experience because they were priests, employing a known theological language and referring to the sacraments, the patristic tradition, and so on, while others do not use specialist language. Yet the fact that they reflect on their experiences and write their memoirs reveals

17 Andronescu 2009, 6–7.

18 Andronescu 2009, 7.

something important to the reader. The details of their experiences these stories preserve is extremely important.

In using the testimonies we are not concerned with the promotion of political values. Our main interest is to see how the prisoners understood their Christian identity in both freedom and in prison conditions. Their belonging to one political orientation or another is not a selection criterion. However, many of those who abandoned their national, political, and religious beliefs in favour of communist ones were released. Without completely abandoning the convictions for which they were arrested, we observe a reorientation, a certain sublimation, and transfiguration. In other words, the prisoners stop living in the revolt and inner turmoil caused by their confinement and open themselves more towards the transcendent and become more sensitive to the people around them as well.

Despite the communist prisons' embodiment of humiliation and physical, spiritual, and moral annihilation, one can observe a Christian perspective in all of them, especially in several testimonies of those who passed through the prisons. We encounter people who had previously been less spiritually engaged living profoundly Christian lives. Contrary to common expectations, we witness cases where physical and mental humiliation is used for spiritual elevation – situations that are rarely met outside prison life, as several of the imprisoned persons confess. Although some of them considered themselves good Christians before imprisonment, it was only in prison that they understood sin and repentance more deeply, achieving an increasing spiritual consciousness. Most began their spiritual ascension with a minute examination of their consciousness and endured a time of awareness of sin. We will now examine some testimonies to see the difficulty of this process.

From revolt to spiritual understanding

In the literature chosen for this article several testimonies reflect on the experience of suffering. In these confessions we sense something that can be regarded as revolt, the revolt of prisoners who find it difficult to cope with their suffering. Amidst this spiritual grinding the prisoners sought answers in the books that were circulating in the prisons like *The Paterikon*, *The Salvation of Sinners*, *The Lives of the Saints*, *the Bible*, and several others. Reading these books helped them gain a better understanding and turn more towards their inner selves. In addition to the study of spiritual books, they prayed deeply

in the solitude of their cells, seeking to understand the meaning of their suffering. After a time of torment and struggle they experienced a state of enlightenment through God's grace in which they saw the sinfulness of their souls.

Without a useful approach to the suffering around them, the imprisoned experienced a sense of revolt. They seemed to be participating in a trial of God – a revolt against Him. We find such moods in Demostene Andronescu's verses:

Tonight, Lord, You'll go to bed hungry.
You will not have the unleavened bread of prayer at dinner,
Not a glimmer of humility, not a drop of light
Which sometimes was flickering in the candle of my mind.¹⁹

Andronescu was arrested several times and imprisoned. In 1952, just before graduating from the Faculty of History, Andronescu was arrested. He was accused of hiding or distributing books banned by the communist regime. On the last occasion in 1955 he was sentenced to 20 years in prison, where he wrote more than 200 poems. He managed to remember almost half of them and published them many years later.

Valeriu Gafencu had a similar experience. He was a former law student who was arrested and sentenced to 25 years in prison in December 1941 for involvement in anti-regime activities. He was 20 years old. In prison he endured a great spiritual struggle. He confessed that he was respected in social life and considered a very good person, an exemplar of moral conduct. He prayed to God to help him see the reasons for and meaning of his suffering: "...why was I suffering?"²⁰ Valeriu looked at things differently, however, after he had acquired a spiritual consciousness:

I saw that I was a sinful man. I trembled at the thought of my sins, at the thought of my powerlessness. I realized that I, who wanted an ideal world with all my heart, am a sinner. Therefore, the first thing that was necessary was for me to become a pure man, a new man.²¹

¹⁹ Andronescu 2009, 278. (Translation here and hereafter by the author).

²⁰ Iorgovan 2014, 71.

²¹ Iorgovan 2014, 73.

The most immediate benefit of the awareness of sins was an understanding of the meaning of suffering. Valeriu confessed: "Suffering, no matter how difficult it may be, has no other meaning than the cleansing of souls thirsting for salvation."²²

Ioan Ianolide also strove to grasp the meaning and purpose of his suffering. In 1941 he was sentenced to 25 years in prison for activities considered dangerous by the regime. He was 22 years old. In prison Ioan Ianolide attained a deeper understanding of the Christian life. It was only now that he understood that his high ideals were overshadowed by the sins that he had overlooked: "I was ashamed of the hidden sin."²³ Instead of the self-confidence nurtured by a hidden pride, humility allowed Ianolide to see God's care. Once vanity was crushed, Ianolide was very ashamed, exclaiming: "I'm a wretch!"²⁴ He felt the need to confess his sinful state sincerely to everyone, out of a state of humility he had never felt before, a humility without which he felt he was not in God.

As a result of these discoveries, Christ becomes for Ioan Ianolide and other prisoners a principle of life. For example, meeting with Christ in the depth of his soul becomes for Ioan Ianolide an opportunity for a spiritual rebirth. This time, the virtue is no longer just a principle but becomes life and light, the growing presence of Christ in his soul: "I was overwhelmed by inner joys. I was living a real, gradual and mysterious rebirth."²⁵

As some poems point out, if people trust God, even the most severe suffering can become something that can be of help. All suffering that is borne can acquire healing features. One can find this understanding in some of Radu Gyr's poems. Radu Gyr received his PhD in literature and was a Senior Lecturer at the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy of the University of Bucharest. He was arrested and imprisoned several times. In his poem *You wouldn't caress*, suffering can teach people to smile ("only those who sigh can smile"), to love ("today you wouldn't love if you hadn't been moaning"), to pity ("if you didn't bind your wound with your hand / you would not anoint others' wounds").²⁶ In another poem, *The Prostration*, the poet is convinced that the voluntary assumption of suffering intertwined with trust in God's providence

²² Iorgovan 2014, 72.

²³ Ianolide 2012, 40.

²⁴ Ianolide 2012, 40.

²⁵ Ianolide 2012, 40–41.

²⁶ Gyr 2010, 60.

transforms evil into spiritual strength. Suffering here becomes a “golden bridge, a high bridge”, a ladder between the human being and God, while each wound becomes a “censer to heaven”.²⁷

The confessions of Father Liviu Brânzaș are also very detailed. He was arrested on 15 November 1951 for anti-communist activity and sentenced to 25 years’ forced labour for plotting against the social order. He spent 13 years in prison. In his writings he depicts a process of external suffering through hunger, cold, starvation, and humiliation that becomes an internal coldness. Physical suffering becomes a source of physical and moral strength that brings about an extraordinary inner turmoil. In prison Fr Liviu regrets how he spent the time before his imprisonment. He finds he has been superficial in fulfilling the moral ideal. Although in his youth he strove for self-perfection, he now realises that his efforts for faith and virtue were overshadowed by instincts and pride.²⁸

In addition to the testimonies already discussed, the conversion of Nicole Valery to the Christian faith adds some interesting new elements. In her youth the author was a supporter of Iuliu Maniu, a well-known politician in the National Peasants’ Party, the main political force that opposed the Soviet occupation of Romania, in which she became active. She was also the editor of the *Dreptatea* newspaper until 1945. Because these activities were considered dangerous, Nicole was arrested for the first time in June 1945 and spent more than two months in the Malmaison prison in Bucharest. She managed to escape thanks to the intervention of some American friends but was rearrested in 1949 and spent the next four years in various prisons and labour camps in Romania. In her work the author presents the stages of her return to Christ. Although she was raised and educated in an Orthodox Christian family, Nicole acknowledges her state of unbelief when she was free. While alone with her consciousness in cell 24, between long interrogations, Nicole experiences a profound transformation. In the overflow of confusing thoughts brought about by the new prison situation, she lives a moment of spiritual cleansing. After repeated and minute examinations of her soul she realises that what she and most people consider small, normal, and natural things – all such neglected issues – become the opportunity for a second conversion.²⁹

²⁷ Gyr 2010, 61.

²⁸ Brânzaș 2001, 22.

²⁹ Valery-Grossu 2002, 22–23.

All these testimonies show an understanding that overwhelms the prisoners. The spiritual awareness they attain is manifested before their sins, and all subsequent effects are seen as a discovery of the presence of God, of His care in the midst of suffering. Additionally, the question of suffering becomes a path to understanding the mysteries of God. Many prisoners realised their limitations, and that suffering helped them discover themselves. It was only after sighing, moaning, and weeping that peace and happiness descended upon their souls. Nicole Valery confesses that after a time of much uneasiness, when she had experienced a great deal of pain, peace rested in her soul: "When at the end of the second night, after I had brought everything to light, and when, in loud cries, I had concluded the judgment with a prayer in which I also begged for divine grace, a tremendous peace wholly overwhelmed my soul... I felt relieved. It seemed that a sweet joy filled a void."³⁰

In another situation Fr Zosim Oancea helps his cellmates understand their suffering. He was arrested in 1948 and jailed for helping and supporting the families of those who had already been imprisoned or even killed. He spent 15 years in communist prisons. Fr Zosim relates how he explained the beatitudes to his fellow prisoners.³¹ The immediate effect is that people start to meditate and show indifference to the surrounding environment. The explanation is made in contrast with the worldly grasping of happiness. The purpose of the discussion is to generate hope. Everything is linked to the context of the prison, a contextual explanation. For example, Fr Zosim illustrates the beatitude, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (Matthew 5:8), with an example that all can experience: the fact that they are alive, in spite of very little food and bad treatment, is a sign of God's presence. They can thus see God. The focus on suffering as a sign of a true follower of God is counterbalanced by the promise of reward. And Fr Zosim greatly underlines this.

When suffering is deliberately embraced, peace, happiness, and love descend upon the prisoners' souls. However, this state is difficult to attain. The prisoners understand God better through suffering, sensing that He is closer. By leading them to God, suffering becomes a sort of guide, just as the Old Testament prophecies guide us to Christ. Nicolae Steinhardt has this experience. After much uproar, searching, and suffering he feels the divine presence in his cell: "...happiness and peace cannot be created by ourselves, mate-

³⁰ Valery-Grossu 2002, 33.

³¹ Oancea 2004, 82–85.

rially ... they are given to us from above... I begin to sense that Christ is present in prison... Waves of joy pour over us, flow, flood us, overwhelm us."³² On 30 December 1959 Steinhardt was detained and asked to testify against his arrested friends. He was given three days to consider. Because he refused, he was arrested and sentenced to 12 years' hard labour for plotting against the state.

We will not end these testimonies without examining some remarks of the distinguished Romanian theologian Fr Dumitru Stăniloae. He was arrested in 1958 and spent five years in communist prisons because he was a member of the Burning Bush, a twentieth-century Romanian spiritual movement. The Burning Bush gathered together important lay intellectuals, monks and clerics participating in hesychastic education and experience. Apart from regret for the sufferings endured by his family, Fr Dumitru was grateful that he and many other imprisoned priests shared the sufferings of the Romanian people. He confessed that in prison he meditated greatly on suffering, and this was reflected in his writing.³³

To highlight the pedagogical purpose of tribulations, Fr Dumitru turned to patristic literature. First, he showed that vainglory and pride generally disturbed people who strove to live a virtuous life. In these situations God showed His paternal love by allowing tribulations to come upon such people to cure them of vainglory and pride after they had not been overcome by the other passions. The new situation was felt as abandonment, but it actually had a pedagogical purpose. It included not only external troubles but certain internal discouragements.³⁴

Further on in his writings we find several causes of the existence of tribulations. He lists five main causes. First, through troubles, God pushes us away from the possibility of sinning. Second, tribulations come after sins have been committed, even if the latter are confessed. The purpose is to restore and strengthen the fallen human nature. Third, tribulations are allowed by God as a trial to strengthen the human nature and to safeguard it from future mistakes. A fourth reason shows that troubles can come, even if people have not sinned. They come for the sins of others. Finally, their endurance shows strength and wisdom.³⁵

32 Steinhardt 2005, 50.

33 Stăniloae 1998, 43.

34 Stăniloae 2001, 186–187.

35 Stăniloae 2001, 193–194.

As the testimonies in this section demonstrate, the existence of tribulations is carefully allowed by God with a precise purpose. Suffering comes as a cure for some spiritual infirmities. It therefore softens, transforms, and deepens understanding. It thus becomes a school that opens up sensibilities that would otherwise remain hidden. We intend to deepen this understanding by briefly examining a well-known writing that deals with patience in suffering – *the Book of Job*.

The healing suffering in the Book of Job

In discussing suffering, a brief reference to the *Book of Job* is necessary to underline its meaning. This Old Testament book shows the value of the experience of suffering, especially when the beginning of the book is compared with its end. It is obvious that the experience of suffering plays a special role in everything that entails spiritual growth, particularly patience in suffering. Not everyone uses the experience of suffering in the same way, however, and it may therefore also entail spiritual regression. We can see also this in the *Book of Job*.

The author of the *Book of Job* deals with one of the most disturbing mysteries of earthly life: why does the righteous man suffer here on earth? The book's main goal is therefore to solve the problem of suffering. Additionally, it offers its readers in the person of Job a beautiful model of patience in suffering.

As can be seen in the *Book of Job*, suffering can play a pedagogical role. For example, in Chapter 36 God opens the ears of the afflicted, makes them listen, and uses distress to open their eyes and to teach them (Job 36:15).³⁶ This means God speaks to them – that is, to those who suffer – in their affliction. In other words, He has a message for the suffering. In suffering God gives a certain kind of knowledge so that people attend to His voice. God also saves those who suffer through their suffering; he gets them to listen through their pain. Suffering can therefore also be seen as an opportunity given for wisdom to see and understand that everything is in God's hands.

At the same time the *Book of Job* emphasises that devotion to God can be the expression of a direct and disinterested relationship that is independent of any hazardous occurrence. The book tells us that Satan claims that Job's rela-

³⁶ The Good News Translation is used in this article for biblical references.

tionship with God is contaminated by his interests in his possessions and large family. A long series of misfortunes follows in Job's life, and he manages to prove his genuine devotion to God. Gradually, Job loses his riches, children, social position, health, and even his wife's attachment. In his new circumstances he has no material sacrifices to offer to God: "I was born with nothing, and I will die with nothing. The Lord gave, and now He has taken away. May His name be praised!" (Job 1: 21). Indeed, it seems that when he loses everything, he can devote himself wholly to God as his last hope. Finally, he ends up face to face with God.

The end of the *Book of Job* shows a higher knowledge of God. Job ultimately says that he has seen God: "In the past I knew only what others had told me, but now I have seen you with my own eyes" (Job 42:5). This means Job has seen God through his suffering. It is obvious that he has reached this stage with difficulty, as it is difficult to understand that it is not only blessings and good things that represent God's care, but troubles also reveal His caring attitude towards people. Both blessings and troubles may therefore be ways of experiencing God.

We can infer that the absence of troubles and suffering in one's life may make someone more formal, superficial, and less engaged in their relationship with God. We have seen this in the testimonies we described in the previous section. Yet the same testimonies revealed that it was the experience of suffering that helped prisoners better understand their relationship with God. They became more engaged in their Christian life and regretted their previous superficiality. This repentance, which was well illustrated in the prisoners' testimonies, is also edifying in the *Book of Job*. It is only when Job realises this difference that he exclaims: "therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:6).

Reflection and further perspectives

When human beings accept their suffering, they become more sensitive, closer to God, and open to the love of others. They begin to realise that suffering helps them overcome selfishness, and that it can play a positive role. However, if suffering is not freely accepted and embraced, the sufferer tends to rebel. Suffering does not have an inherently positive value but becomes valuable only insofar as it is willingly embraced. Even if this suffering is forcibly imposed by others, once embraced, it is valuable. In this context, where pri-

soners discover the spirit of solidarity and mutual aid, they also discover the tremendous power of forgiveness. When freely embraced, suffering becomes an extraordinary gift, a great honour. This attitude radically changes the experience of suffering. Not everyone has this attitude: those who do, do not have it all the time because the human being is not constant. Some people can also accept certain degrees of suffering; others are unable to embrace them. It is not all positive; we see problems – the inner struggle of the people concerned.

At a deeper level the testimonies have shown that suffering helps Christian prisoners recognise, repent of, and turn away from their sins, whether known or hidden. The prisoners' testimonies and the biblical reference to Job's suffering have thus shown that suffering plays a pedagogical role in our lives.

Finding a meaning for their suffering helped the prisoners survive. Those who were able to identify a spiritual meaning for their suffering were able to endure great trials, surviving longer than those who did not. They managed to overcome the initial phase, when the experience of suffering was regarded as absurd and thus entirely rejected. This meaning was gained through repentance, by identifying a work of God in that experience – by finding a purpose, no matter how hard or absurd the suffering was.

As expected, the envisaged testimonies have shown that the acceptance of suffering broadens the spiritual horizon. The fact that some people understood their Christianity better in prison than in freedom is not really a surprise. In general, troubles change us greatly. It is a common experience that immanent preoccupations diminish in the face of difficulties, while a transcendent horizon opens. The brief reference to the *Book of Job* reveals similar results.

Finally, a broader analysis should depart from the premise that spiritual life, following the example of Christ, is the same throughout time, underpinned by the same Spirit of Christ. Inevitably, we will find common things that fit the tradition because the prisoners were Christians, and their thinking was tied to and influenced by tradition. Yet tradition is something that gives us access to a new experience in the Holy Spirit. In our approach we must be open to all nuances of spiritual experiences, to the specific characteristics of each, its freshness in the Holy Spirit. We therefore expect that an analysis of a broader range of testimonies will reveal that experiences in communist prisons deepened the tradition, bringing new things and nuances.

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