News

A composite image features the book "He Leadeth Me" by Jesuit Fr. Walter Ciszek and a photo

A composite image features the book "He Leadeth Me" by Jesuit Fr. Walter Ciszek and a photo of Ciszek. The Polish American priest ministered for years in Soviet captivity. (OSV News/A.D. Times/Megan Marley)

Gina Christian

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The canonization cause for Jesuit Fr. Walter Ciszek — a Polish American priest who ministered amid years in Soviet captivity — has been terminated, although Vatican's decision does not "diminish the enduring spiritual value" of his witness, said a leading advocate for the cause.

In an April 9 letter, Msgr. Ronald Bocian — board president of the former Father Walter Ciszek Prayer League — advised fellow league members that the Diocese of Allentown, Pennsylvania, had been informed the cause's documentation "does not support" advancing the case for beatification or sainthood.

Bocian's letter replicated a statement from the diocese, provided to OSV News April 17, saying the prayer league will now become the Father Walter J. Ciszek Society and "remain committed to honoring his memory, sharing his message, and

encouraging devotion to the profound spiritual insights he left to the Church."

"This development comes after years of careful study and discernment at the level of the Holy See, which bears the responsibility of evaluating each Cause with thoroughness, integrity, and fidelity to the Church's norms," said the diocese, which assumed responsibility for the cause following its initiation by the New Jersey-based Byzantine Catholic Eparchy of Passaic.

OSV News is awaiting a response to requests for comment from the Vatican Dicastery for the Causes of Saints and Msgr. Bocian, who serves as pastor of Divine Mercy Parish in Father Ciszek's hometown of Shenandoah, Pennsylvania.

Born in 1904 to Polish immigrant parents, Ciszek was ordained as Jesuit priest in 1937, becoming the first American in the order in the Byzantine Catholic rite, one of the 23 Eastern Catholic churches that, along with the Roman Catholic Church, comprise the universal Catholic Church.

As a seminarian, he had studied in Rome as part of an initiative under Pope Pius XI to equip priests for ministry in Russia. Originally assigned to Poland, he was able to enter Russia on false papers after World War II broke out in 1939 to minister in secret.

Working as an unskilled laborer, Ciszek was arrested in 1941 by the secret police as a suspected spy and sentenced to 15 years of hard labor in Siberia. While in various prison camps, he managed to celebrate Mass and hear confessions.

After his sentence ended in 1955, he was nonetheless forced to reside in Russia, and worked in a chemical factory — and after decades of no communication was at last able to write to family in the U.S., who had presumed him dead.

In 1963, President John F. Kennedy secured his release and that of an American student, exchanging them for two Soviet agents. Until his death in 1984, Ciszek worked at the John XXIII Center at Fordham University, which is now the Center for Eastern Christian Studies at the Jesuit-run University of Scranton in Pennsylvania.

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Ciszek recounted his experiences in the books *He Leadeth Me* and *With God in Russia*, co-written with fellow Jesuit Fr. Daniel Flaherty.

Even as his canonization cause has been relinquished, Ciszek's impact lives on, said the diocese.

"While this news may understandably bring disappointment to the many who have been inspired by Father Ciszek's example of heroic faith, it does not diminish the enduring spiritual value of his life, witness, and legacy," the diocese said in its statement.

"We are deeply grateful for the many years of prayer, devotion, and support from the faithful. Father Ciszek's courage, perseverance, and unwavering trust in God amidst extraordinary suffering has led many souls to God and will continue to touch countless lives," said the diocese. "Even as the formal canonization process has been stopped, the grace flowing from his witness remains alive."