

## BOOK REVIEW

**Nijole Sadunaite, A Radiance in the Gulag: The Catholic Witness of Nijole Sadunaite. Translated by Casimir Pugevicius and Marian Skabeikis. Manassas, VA: Trinity Communications, 1987. 148 pp. Hard Cover, \$9.95. Paper, \$5.95.**

A Radiance in the Gulag is the story in her own words of a Lithuanian woman whose unflinching Christian witness led her to arrest, imprisonment and exile for six years in the Soviet Gulag. The book, pieced together from separate manuscripts smuggled out of the Soviet Union, was translated and published in 1987. On the cover is the photograph of Nijole Sadunaite, whose radiant faith is apparent in her smile and upward gaze against the backdrop of barbed wire.

The manuscripts are actual reports and letters written by Nijole during her imprisonment, interrogation and exile which were somehow smuggled out and hand carried to Lithuania, to be reproduced in the underground Catholic journal which she had previously helped to circulate. For this "crime", the circulation and reproduction of a Christian journal, and also for assisting a priest by hiring a lawyer for his defense, Nijole was tried and convicted -- in a country that professes to have religious liberty for its citizens!

Two unforgettable impressions from reading this book are, first, the unbelievable cruelty and heartlessness of the KGB and others toward their own people for the crime of practicing their Christian faith. The second is the equally unbelievable courage, faith and joy of this woman on every possible occasion, even when she was desperately ill, starving and fainting. She never failed to pray for her persecutors, and to rejoice in her own sufferings, saying repeatedly, "To suffer for Christ is a special sign of election." The book ends with a hymn of praise and thanksgiving.

Although there were many female prisoners, Nijole was carefully separated from the murderers and violent criminals and placed under six guards instead of the two allotted to criminals of that sort, apparently because she was thought to be more dangerous. Speaking of the criminals she met, Nijole says:

I was amazed at the terrible amorality on the part of all of them, the complete loss of discernment between good and evil, the dehumanization. Here you see what a poor creature man is without God, and that the greatest offenders of all are those who systematically, forcibly and constantly infect everyone with the atheistic lie - the Soviet Government atheists. Those millions of poor, dehumanized prisoners are the fruit of their "education."

. . . After a few days they herded us all into a train, but they did not put me into the same car with the female criminals. They told us that they had to transport 'specially dangerous criminals,' namely me, in a separate compartment, under special guard. . . They shut me up in a separate cubicle and took me away. . . Along the whole route the only things we could see were barbed wire enclosures - concentration camps - soldiers, guards and dogs, one after the other, more than twenty concentration camps in which were crowded a

whole Soviet republic of slaves. The hard labor concentration camp for female political prisoners is reached after passing all the other concentration camps strung out along the railroad line, which carries prisoners almost exclusively. For this reason they did not even close the little windows here. We had arrived in a slave state . . . The journey from Vilnius (Lithuania) to Mordovia had taken a whole month. (pp. 67-68)

During the time when the events which the author described many of us in the West had lulled ourselves with the comforting thought that things are getting better in the Soviet Union, and that probably the prison system and the KGB are not so bad as they were. This book effectively quenches such false assessment of the pre-Gorbachev conditions. Torture, ridicule and merciless harassment of Christians believers were the order of the day, as many dissidents will testify. Even innocent children and babies were their victims. One wonders how it was possible for anyone to remain faithful in such a climate, on the one hand, and how it was possible for the Soviet Union to maintain the pretense of religious liberty on the other. While much has changed recently, there are still remnants of prejudicial mistreatment of believers.

This vivid picture of the life and hardships of Christians in the Soviet Union places a great burden on us, a responsibility and a privilege to work and pray for our sisters and brothers who are not free. Even after she was released from exile in 1980 Nijole was harassed, followed and threatened by the KGB. As recently as 1986 and probably since then, too, priests have been arrested and imprisoned.

For the future, hear the words of Nijole:

. . . without the will of God not a hair falls from our head. We must all trust in Him and not fear any persecution, but work as much as we are able for the good and the glory of God. Fear is the beginning of betrayal. We have to fear only that we work and worry too little about the things of Christ and the church, and there is too little sacrifice in our lives. Let us lean on Christ and we shall be unbeatable." (p. 113)

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