

Rev. Ihor Tsar

THE LAST SHALL BE FIRST

Translated from Ukrainian by
Halyna Pastushuk and Zorian Stech

I wrote this book for the sake of those who have spent their entire life behind barbed wire – orphanages, children’s homes, prison camps. I want all the miserable ones who are presently in prison to become free children of God tomorrow. Therefore, as long as the sun shines above us, let’s learn to love God and Ukraine, let us hurry to do good and prepare to meet Jesus.

On the front cover is the Kaminets-Podilsky fortress where the Ukrainian national hero Ustym Karmaliuk was imprisoned (he was imprisoned in the first tower on the left).

On the back cover is Mount Hrushka, where the house of my parents once stood. In the background one can see the Sian river and the town of Lisko.

The text on the back cover page reads:

Lord, we thank You for the fact that the Ukrainian people have never been occupiers and have never kept anyone in captivity, for what does a human being get from winning over the whole world but losing his or her soul? Although destiny allotted Ukraine a thorny path, this turns out to be our good fortune, because the Heavenly Kingdom is entered through a narrow gate. We are alive today, please understand this people, and Ukraine has not yet perished because the almighty God is with us, He who assured: I am with you through all days, until the end of the world!

Amen.

I express my deep gratitude to the St. Volodymyr Fund and the Bear and Lion Society for their contribution to the publication of this book.

ABOUT THE TRANSLATION

Every effort was made to preserve the tone and structure of the original Ukrainian-language version of this book. The second part of this book contains letters written by people, mostly prisoners, which were not written with a view to publication. In some instances, they may include repetition, grammatical inaccuracies, colloquialisms, and incomplete thoughts.

Zorian Stech.

FOREWORD

Society has such “underground” places into which not a single “normal” person wants to peep. For who would hurry, in a sound state of mind, to plunge into such a place of groans and sorrow as a prison is? There, as if in a kind of infernal melting pot, wrath is bubbling and penitence is swirling, sin is scorching, and hope is smoldering, evil is being multiplied and goodness is being crystallized. There, behind a couple of rows of barbed wire is a real purgatory. It is like a “collector-distributor” in which human destinies are decided: some prisoners are irreversibly driven down into the black darkness of greater sin; others, by God’s wonderful grace, distil their souls and reach out for the good. It is never easy to comprehend the mystery of such a transfiguration. Only very few are gifted with the ability to discern that the Holy Spirit has touched someone’s soul and is working on it. You, dear reader, are holding in your hands a book written by one of these all-seeing “specialists” who with equal ease managed to break through the prison walls and through the walls of the soul’s prison.

Father Ihor Tsar is a man with a truly stormy fate. He was deprived of many things in his childhood and youth, and reading the confession of his own life story is not for the faint of heart. It is the stubborn struggle of a man with a beast that was sitting inside of him and on top of him, grinning at him with its multiple faces from behind the backs of his neighbours. Not being righteous, like Job from the Bible, nor happy, like Job was at the beginning, this young man with a tsar-like name could have persistently repeated Job’s complaints: “why did I not perish at birth, and die as I came from the womb?” (Job 3: 11). At the same time, it was like Job’s, a truly distressed struggle with God: “does it please you to oppress me, to spurn the work of your hands, while you smile on the schemes of the wicked?” (Job 10: 3). Nevertheless, it happens so often in our strange world that he who has not fathomed the depth of sin does not know the luxury of holiness. The Holy Spirit was working powerfully in this rebellious soul – and He emerged victorious. From that time on, the personal sufferings of Father Ihor have become a road of liberation which could now be used to free other prisoners of sin.

In fulfilling his mission, Father Ihor is really possessed. This is symbolized for me not only by his daily vigilant memory of those who are longing for a good word, a warm sweater, or at least worn shoes in the prison “underground,” but also by the fact that this very book is devoted to: “my dear prison lambs.” It is simply impressive to hear such unexpected tenderness come from a strong man of great stature, a man with a palm that can knock down even a bull. No calm stretch of balanced emotions can last in the heart of this man. There, where wrathful revolt once used to bubble, boils big, unselfish love. In the Middle Ages, such stormy souls led great armies or founded orders of friars. In our times of the “criminalization of the whole country,” Father Ihor is selflessly reviving in our Church the “order” of a prison chaplain. Not every priest will be able to match the heat of his heart, and his gift cannot be recreated in a routine way. Father Ihor’s mission is to loosen administrative barriers, human indifference, and social stereotypes. And for that, a real thermonuclear energy of the soul is required.

The main heroes of this book whose names change all the time are prisoners/recidivists in whom God’s image is still visible. There is no such verse in the Bible that says that God’s decision to create a human being in His own image and likeness (see Gen 1:26) does not refer to a man in a prison uniform. Therefore, however much stilted God’s image is in the worst recidivist, He is still there. Moreover, this image is pulsing in a strange way – sometimes it glows with the pure beauty of God’s creation, another time it fades away again into the darkness of sin. We rarely notice these pulse rhythms. For us, a criminal is a rough collage of evil who shall never be softened by the pain of repentance. That is why when we witness humaneness in a convict, we usually “reassure” ourselves that this is just a coincidence and tomorrow he will go back to being a beast again. Well of course, it often happens so. And only the chaplain and pastor of souls grasps these pulse rhythms and, like a sentinel by fire, blows the tiny flames whenever they glow. For he knows that even the most unattended icon is sometimes able to replenish its original colours, even the most withered photo sometimes revives itself. On this belief in the possible transfiguration of even the worst criminal stands the whole of Christianity.

Although this book is mainly about prisoners, it speaks loudly – between the paragraphs and the lines – about a priest. What should the pastor of souls be like today? To what extent can he, the

spokesman of God's Kingdom, allow himself to be attached to this world? At what moment does the preached word on the priest's lips threaten to become hypocrisy? These all are topics which for Father Ihor have not just a theoretical significance. I find it probable that some readers might not find it easy to read some of Father Ihor's critical thoughts about his fellow colleagues. One cannot but acknowledge that such a conversation about the mission and personality of a priest – especially between priests themselves – is of vital importance. When a servant of God borrows from the world such principles as the principle of becoming rich at any cost, “defending the honour of his uniform,” or “not taking out the trash from home,” he becomes a slave of his own imperfection and discredits himself as a pastor. The damage to the Church from let's say, “not taking out the trash from home” is bigger than from the promulgation of moral trespasses on the part of the priest. The experience of the Roman Catholic Church in the United States in this sense is especially instructive.

Parallel to this, there exists another aspect to the problem. To overcome successfully these flaws does not mean to fall automatically into the evangelical radicalism of the early Christians. Riches earned with hard and endless work cannot be regarded as evil, worthy of deprecation on the part of the Christian. Therefore, since the times of the early Church, the principle of Christian mutual help was formulated as such: the rich help the poor financially and the poor support the rich with their prayers. For a prisoner, it is of special importance to learn to be in harmony with the world because unfortunately, this world very easily abandons him. The very idea of being convicted a prisoner goes in certain confrontation with society. Thus, a chaplain must be careful not to push his imprisoned spiritual children into judging the world in response.

This is why both the chaplain and the neophyte prisoner, as any Christian in this sinful world, must carefully keep an eye on his soul so that he can unite it at all times with two truths. According to one of them, nothing converts the sinner so much as the personal example of a Christian, especially that of a pastor of souls. This example liberates another person with the power for righteous life. According to the second truth, one should run away from sin and not from the world as such, although understanding the world as sinful by definition. Therefore, the main mission of a Christian prisoner (as of every Christian) is to give testimony embracing everyone with his love. If you are still in prison, let everyone recognize in you spiritual freedom even though you might still be wearing a prison uniform. If you have been released, let others see in your example that one can get up even after the greatest fall, just as one of the characters of this book – Taras – managed to do.

Reading this book will be a revelation for many. The administration of camps, due to various circumstances, often becomes callous towards human pain. Such callousness of the soul I am afraid, is an inevitable side effect of this specific profession (such as the callousness of a soldier or, let's say, a surgeon). One cannot survive long with a timid, unprotected soul among open and accomplished criminals. But still, it is not for the sake of eloquence that prisons are called in Ukrainian “correctional,” and not “punitive.” The main mission of a prison is to evoke in the prisoner's soul not the desire of avenge, but sadness for lost freedom and contact with close people, after which repentance should come. Therefore, assistance on the part of the priest-chaplain, who looks on the prisoner from a different perspective, should be very helpful for the camp administration.

One can only imagine how important this book may become for a bishop or for a young priestly soul who is still looking for his particular calling. The institution of chaplaincy requires special attention and every kind of encouragement. Of course, all people need spiritual care – in parishes, orphanages, hospitals, army units, or homes for elderly people. They all look up to the Church for hope. In some sense however, prisoners evoke the image of lost sheep, so much that it is hard not to recall Christ's important teaching: “what do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off?” (Matthew 18: 12). I am not aiming here at the somewhat extreme requirement “to leave all the other people in the mountains” for the sake of a punished criminal, but to leave in the lurch God's spark imprisoned in him would also be a mistake for the pastors of souls.

Finally, this book will be indispensable for society in general. I am afraid that we are repaying the criminal with almost the same thing with which he has wronged us before. He sees in us only an object for satisfying his desires and he does not respect the human being in us. In judging the criminal,

we often, for our part, quench our thirst for revenge and thus dishonour the human being in him. Nevertheless, a court sentences a criminal to imprisonment and not the cruelest punishments. The punitive character of our prison system is partially responsible for the perpetual uncoiling of the criminal spiral which is traumatizing all of society very profoundly. Instead of protecting ourselves from this criminality by uncoiling the spiral of hatred towards prisoners, one should try humane methods of re-education. And this is where the introduction of a prison chaplain meets the deep interests of our distressed society.

Concluding my preface, let me be so bold as to formulate a certain dedication. But before that, I would like to mention one instance from my own life in prison. Being a twenty-eight year-old member of the Ukrainian Helsinki Group, I was arrested in 1977 for “anti-Soviet propaganda” – article 62 of the Criminal Code of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (CC USSR) and article 70 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Soviet Socialist Federative Republic (CC RSSFR) – and then sentenced to seven years imprisonment and five years exile. Once after a long hunger strike in political zone # 36 in the village of Cuchyno, Perm region (it was probably in 1980) when I had already made the decision to eat again, I was “taken for a ride.”¹ That meant the daily food allowance on transition – a loaf of bread and one herring – that’s far from being enough after a long hunger strike. Nevertheless, my young body surprisingly digested even this, although it certainly was not filling. In one of the transit prisons, I was led into a ward with three criminals. I greeted them and took my place in the corner. The three convicts looked at me, exchanged glances, got their bread rations and silently put them in front of me...It is hard to describe how this simple human deed affected my soul. With tears in my eyes, I thanked them for the bread which at that moment gained for me a liturgical significance. Having no idea about the crimes committed by these unexpected benefactors of mine, I was passionately praying to God and asking Him to forgive them everything, despite the heaviness of their trespasses.

Therefore, I dedicate this preface to those numerous camp benefactors who, with their humane deeds, overcome the evil which is so insidiously swallowing them up. Also, I bow my head in honour of the author of this book, Father Ihor Tsar. I am sure that when he hears on Judgment Day God’s questions “...I was naked – did you clothe me? I was sick – did you visit me? I was in prison – did you come to me?” (look at Matthew 25: 36), he will stand before the Lord in peace and with a clear conscience.

October 14, 2004.

Myroslav Marynovych.

¹ Slang meaning transportation under surveillance to a place for deported prisoners in transit, or to another prison.

DO NOT FORSAKE ME LORD!

My God! Look from Your height at me, Your sinful and miserable slave. Here I stand before You on my knees covered in dust and ashes, a mortal man. A lost man am I in this world for I have sinned before You Lord, greatly sinned and I am aware of what awaits me for my sins. My conscience is already judging me. So as long as my heart beats and my mouth speaks, I repent before You Lord. Forgive me God that I have offended You, my Father and Creator.

I used to be a blinded slave of sin and yet thought it was freedom. The blind led me to the abyss and taught me that it was the right way. And I, poor me, was following them, looking for life in this valley of tears. Eventually I fell, broken by the paralysis of my own sins. My wounded soul groaned and went numb... My eyes never dried from my tears and my exhausted heart was breaking in my chest, hardly coping with the insidiousness of the treacherous world. I became like a beast in a cage. All my friends and acquaintances looked at me like a useless dog and grinned. Evil people were delighted by my misfortune. A black blanket covered my eyes. I could not see the sun during the daytime. Only at night would I go out to the field, fall on my knees, and pray under the canopy of the sky. My prayer was a hard groan and I was sobbing. Only these two words was I able to utter: "God, help!" In my blossoming years I felt that my soul was burnt out and my life lived out. An abyss opened its mouth before me and I was waiting for the end...

And then suddenly, in the midst of that darkness, I saw a ray of light – a ray that lit my reason. My heart throbbed with hope and my soul was revived. My kind-hearted Jesus! I recognized You! It's You, Lord, who came to me, the last sinner in this world. You stretched Your hand of help to me and drew me out from the void. While the world condemned me, You, merciful God, gave me the right to live. You dried my tears and healed my wounded soul. You gave me living water and raised me. With what shall I thank You, my good Saviour, for Your unfathomable grace? My dear Jesus! Take my life, my soul and body! From now on my heart belongs to only You. Fill me entirely with love for You true God! Do not ever forsake me, for I will die without You! Send me the power of the Holy Spirit so that I can enter the world by the apostolic way, break the devil's chains and sow, Lord, Your truth and love. You see, Almighty God, that the sun, moon, and stars shine in Your glory. Then give me God, such a firm faith and such great love, and such a life that I could shine in Your glory too! Amen.

1987.

From the Book of the Prophet Isaiah (58: 6-8)

IS NOT THIS THE KIND OF FASTING THAT I HAVE CHOSEN:

**to loose the chains of injustice
and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free
and break every yoke?
Is it not to share your food with the hungry,
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—
when you see the naked, to clothe him,
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?**

Then your light will break forth like the dawn,
and your healing will quickly appear;
then your righteousness will go before you,
and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.

THIS STRANGE WORLD

“If you love and suffer, remember that only he who burns lives.”

N. Salvaneski

I won't live twice and I do not know when I will die. As a result, I am writing my memoirs on paper. At a young age, I felt as if I was passing through a kind of purgatory on earth while still living. I experienced happiness only after I became a priest and realized for what reason God created me. My life however, has been a constant struggle with the evil world. This is why I have always been faced with one problem before me: to remain a human being under all circumstances. Let every step, breath, and deed of mine be for God's glory as well as for those whom God sends to me for the salvation of their body and soul. In this book, out of everything that I have gone through, I have written only the things, which paper can bear...

The ancient town of Lisko is nested in the picturesque Ukrainian Beskids alongside the glistening Sian river. Ever since one could remember, the town had a little wooden church named in honour of the Nativity of Our Most Holy Lady with its miraculous icon. This church is first mentioned in historical records dating back to the fifteenth century. It is where my grandparents and mother were baptized. Opposite of the town and behind the river stands a tall mountain named Hrushka, rising to an elevation of 583 metres. My great-grandfather (mother's grandfather), Mykola Pylypchak, and his wife Maria, settled on the very peak of that mountain. Through hard work, they eventually earned a large estate. They parented eight children with three dying in early infancy and going to heaven because they were baptized. An innocent man, my great-grandfather was shot dead by Hungarians during World War I from the infiltrations of a scoundrel who had envied him. Great-grandpa could have easily escaped but did not, for he considered himself to be innocent and did not believe that he would be shot dead. He was the first martyr in our family.

At the foot of Mount Hrushka is the small village of Huzeli where my grandma Maria Malets was born. Her parents, Anton and Yevpraksiya, were good people who worked on the land. They had eight children with five dying in early infancy after being baptized. In 1930, my grandpa, Ivan Pylypchak, and grandma, Maria Malets, got married and would live together for sixty-two years. In 1932, grandma's brother Mykola went to eastern Ukraine because he had heard over the radio that in the Soviet state people lived happily. Thus, he ran away from Polish occupation only to find himself in the middle of Bolshevik turmoil. While in prison, he was tortured to death and his wife, Maria, spent eleven years behind bars. She died in the little town of Vesele in Zaporizhia region.

My father Orest comes from the village of Postoliv which lies west of Mount Hrushka. Grandfather Ivan Tsar was a rifleman of the Ukrainian Galician Army. He was taken captive but managed to dig out from underground and escape. He was a member of the church committee and on a few occasions, traveled to Bishop Josaphat Kotsylovski to oversee various matters. He also organized support for the Ukrainian Insurgent Army. Until the day of his death in 1960, he fulfilled various duties for the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists. He wore a traditional Ukrainian embroidered shirt all his life.

Father Josyf Dobriansky was the pastor in Postoliv for twenty-two years (26/11/1886 – 10/12/1973). He was born in the village of Monastyr in the Lisko area. He graduated from the Peremyshl Seminary and then from the academy in Rome. In addition to speaking Ukrainian, he was also fluent in English, German, Latin, and Polish. Although his parish consisted of fifty hectares of land, Father Dobriansky never had enough food to eat. He distributed all the land amongst the people, leaving only a small piece for himself. The whole village shared with him and if people would not bring him food, he would have died from hunger. He was a modest servant of God. He had a wonderful voice and was an excellent choir master. The whole village sang like a bunch of nightingales. He taught religion to children at school and headed Prosvita (an educational organization meaning enlightenment). Father Josyf only had two shirts. One day, a gypsy man came from the village and asked him if he could wear one of his for a feast day. The priest gave it to him. He baptized, conducted marriages, and buried the poor without ever charging people for these sacraments. On Saturday Services dedicated to

the eternal rest of the departed, he would give all the donations to the poor. One evening, someone climbed up his pear tree and the priest asked “who’s there?” In reply he heard, “and who are you?” – “I am a pastor of souls.” And I am a pastor of pears!”² In the early 1930’s, Father Josyf said that a time would come when one would no longer have churches to go to. He called us not to trust the communists, but to hold on to the true Church. After the war, the Bolsheviks intended to drown Father Josyf in the Dniester river because he did not want to accept the religion of the Muscovites. “Go ahead and drown me, for I will not betray the faith of my ancestors!”- was his answer. He suffered from weak lungs his entire life while living in poverty and yet, was provided with many years of life from God. For many years, he lived in a small cellar on 4, Kozatska Street in Lviv. He always wore clothes that were worn out and torn at the elbows and knees but would serve liturgy and share the last slice of bread with those who were near him on a daily basis. Following his death, thirty-six underground priests of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church attended his funeral. His grave can be found at the Lychakiv cemetery in Lviv (field sector # 64).

In 1946, during the barbaric operation “Wistula,”³ Ukrainians were given two hours to leave the lands of their ancestors. My father and his family were forcefully taken to the village of Yaseniv and my mother, to the village of Buchaly, Horodotsky district, Lviv region. They were married in 1957 and by that time, were University graduates. I was born on December 16, 1958. When I was three and a half months, my mother was forced to leave me with my grandmother due to the brief maternity leaves of those times. Furthermore, my mom’s boss, a so-called “liberator” (i.e., ethnic Russian) threatened to prosecute my mother if she did not return to work. This was the case because Soviet authorities had financially sponsored her education and for her to stay with her newborn child at home was simply out of the question. I was secretly baptized at home by Father Teodor Khomko on Easter day in 1959. In 1963, my parents moved to Rudno near Lviv. There in 1964, at 3, Khmelnytskyi Street, my brother Oleh was born. He was also baptized secretly, most likely by the beatified martyr Vasyl Velychkovsky. In the closest neighbourhood from our home, there lived a group of nuns of the Basilian Order and it was there that the baptism took place.

It was my grandfather, Ivan Pylypchak, who had the greatest influence on my early education and upbringing. He would take me on his bike and together we would go to the church in Komarno. Before I could actually walk, I would already be taking part in liturgy. To this day, I can remember the beautifully painted Sts. Peter and Paul church which would later be turned into a warehouse by the Bolshevik-occupants. After that, we would walk six kilometres to the church of St. Michael where on the altar there was a blue and yellow window through which beautiful Ukrainian rays fell on me. I closed my eyes and put my face right under those rays. The warm, nice, tender blue and yellow sun warmed me, pouring light straight into my heart and soul. Due to this sun, I grew up to be a Ukrainian nationalist. A nationalist is someone who loves his native land, language, and culture, and does everything to make sure that his people live with God, are happy, and free. I have always believed that God is stronger than any occupant and that Ukraine would one day rise and become an independent state.

The impressive church of St. Michael was erected by the nationalist leader Father Volodymyr Petryk (11/05/1876 – 02/03/1931). Shortly before the blessing of the church, Polish occupants made Father Volodymyr leave Komarno because he had organized the Sokil society and an orchestra and purchased a tavern and turned it into a school for children. In the town’s centre, he had bought a house for the Prosvita society and the cooperative People’s Union and had founded Prosvita branches in the surrounding villages. He also organized seventeen reading rooms, built a bell-tower for the church of Sts. Peter and Paul, and was the founder and long-time director of the Ukrainian bank. Father Volodymyr eventually ended up in Babyno, near Sambir, and there, also managed to erect a church. Constant persecutions and torture from the hands of the occupiers took a heavy toll on Father Volodymyr Petryk’s health. Nevertheless, he was able to live a worthy life and is an excellent model of a Ukrainian priest. He was buried at the cemetery in the village of Komarno.

² In Ukrainian, the words “souls” and “pears” in the genitive case differ only in one letter, making the dialogue sound funny.

³ Operation “Wistula” was the forced deportation of many Ukrainians from their ethnic lands to the territories (taken from the Germans after World War II) of the Polish Republic, planned and implemented by the Poles in 1946.

I can still remember how I, as a little boy then, would be taken by my grandma's hand to go bless our paska⁴ on Easter. Sometime after the first grade, my cousin and I went around at least half the village caroling on Christmas. Oh how people sang carols in those days! It was as if heaven rejoiced together with everyone caroling! Although people lived in poverty, they were sincere and happy. Every Sunday my grandpa would turn on the radio and we would listen to the liturgy from the Vatican. We had our windows wide open so that the whole world would hear about God. The fairytale Ukrainian land was lush green with blooming gardens and melodious church singing resonating in the air. My grandma would often take the remaining pages from an old, partly burnt prayer-book (in 1953, a fire destroyed half the village), and put them on the table to pray. I also peeked at them and felt something unearthly.

I was ten when my grandma and I were sitting together on the stairs under the porch as I was listening to her story about Petrus Hanchyk – my mother's cousin. In 1924, Petrus was in the fourth grade and was walking home from school in Huzeli. This was in the middle of winter and a ferocious snow storm hit. Suddenly, he was attacked by a rabid dog and severely bitten. Petrus was found in the snow all bloody and barely alive. This happened on a Thursday. Following the attack, a priest came, heard his confession, served Communion, and gave him extreme unction.⁵ Petrus sat in his bed, leaning against the pillow and said: “when on Sunday the bells chime at the church of St. Michael in Lisko to call for liturgy (the church was in front of his house on the opposite bank of the Sian river), I will die...” Sunday came and he asked to open the windows so that he could hear the bells. And so it happened. His death shocked so many people that the whole city came to the funeral. His white casket was carried by girls dressed in white to the Lisko cemetery.

I was listening to that story with tears in my eyes. Suddenly, I looked up into the sky and felt that Petrus was looking at me from another world and that we would meet some day. Then I understood for the first time with my heart that the human soul is eternal and that in the other world we will meet all our relatives and the dearest people who have parted from us.

I saw my native land, the green mountains and the silvery Sian, for the first time in 1969. Since that time, I have always felt that I am only here with my body and that my soul roams somewhere in the picturesque Carpathians where my ancestors once lived and where their bones lay buried. I went there for the second time in 2002. I climbed Mount Hrushka and fell on my knees at the spot where our house once stood. There is a cross there now that was placed there by my grandfather, Ivan Pylypchak, and his brothers, Andriy and Mykhailo. I prayed for all my ancestors and for those who gave their lives in these mountains for Ukraine's independence. What a wonderful land lays there and what pure air! And the Sian runs at the foot of the mountain – everything is like in a fairytale, but only with a tragic past.

I dug a stone from beneath the overgrown ground that used to be part of the house's basement, kissed it, and took it with me. I also visited the cemetery in Lisko. Almost all the surnames on the graves are Ukrainian but written in Polish in an attempt to conceal the Ukrainian identity of this region. I found huge ruins of the destroyed old church of the Nativity of Our Lady. Your heart shudders when you realize that here lay the bones of your ancestors who lived for centuries on this wonderful land. I prayed on these ruins and took with me a piece of scorched brick. Oh God, please give me the opportunity to meet those who once lived here!

In 1952, my grandfather was asked to become the head of the village council because the incumbent had become a drunkard. Half a year passed when a Communist Party coordinator⁶ came to him and said: “Mr. Pylypchak, you work well, you do not drink, do not smoke and are a decent proprietor and yet, you go to church every Sunday. This is incompatible with Soviet morality. You

⁴ Easter basket with food.

⁵ More commonly called the anointing of the sick, the sacrament administered by a priest to a sick person. The teachings of the Second Vatican Council emphasized that the sacrament is intended for the seriously ill but not limited to those who are on their death bed.

⁶ partorg is an abbreviation for “party organizer,” a representative of the Communist Party who was usually responsible for leading a party unit of a bigger or smaller size (it could have been a whole factory, a department at the university, staff members of a school, etc) and his/her task was to keep people under control and report about anyone who was not respecting Party rules.

have to choose between the village council and the church.” And so, grandfather had to go back to the collective farm and work for peanuts. In those days, communist thieves would take loans from people and never return them. I once remember going to a train station to watch my grandpa unload freight cars containing mineral fertilizers. Because of those chemicals, my grandpa and other people would often bleed from their eyes and ears. So horrible was the price for a slice of bread. He could have worked in a cozy office but would only have to reject God.

Grandpa was a giant. He weighed 115 kilograms and could on a bet carry two seventy kilo sacks from the store to his house – a distance of about one kilometre. Due to the tragic death of his father, he was compelled to work the plough from the age of six followed by a whole life of difficult labour. It is only now that I realize that a Ukrainian peasant is a universal human being. Grandpa could cultivate a field, attend to cattle, and was a good carpenter and locksmith. He could pickle cabbage in a barrel and was the best in the whole village at making sausages. It's impossible to mention all of his skills and talents. He finished four grades of secondary school in Lisko, could play a couple of instruments, and was also very good at singing and dancing. He also knew thousands of interesting stories and fables. He spoke very respectfully and yet, was able to entertain people so much that they would just laugh. It seemed sometimes that people would burst from laughter and some even had to leave the house. I was my grandpa's first grandson and he taught me all there was to life. Whenever I would have some free time and on every weekend, I went to the village and worked hard together with my grandpa. This helped me a lot in the later stages of my life.

My mom did everything she could to make sure we had a nice collection of books in our home. She would constantly read me fairytales by Ivan Franko, the Kobzar,⁷ and books about the Cossacks. There was one time when in a trolleybus somewhere, I was four years old and was talking loudly about hetman Bohdan Khmelnytsky. All the people around me were really surprised by what I knew for my age. After the third grade, I got caught up reading a thick book about King Danylo Halytsky followed by the Cossacks and Ukraine. I was also into reading Jack London Thompson's "The World of Animal." Two times before military service, I found the time to read "Spartacus" and would read the book two more times after military service as well as many others. As Taras Shevchenko once said, "a book is our daily bread and living water without which a human being cannot grow and develop normally." I am grateful to God for bestowing in me the love for reading because in books I have found characters that have served as good examples for me. They inspired me to fight bravely against the evil of this world and to fight for truth and freedom. I have always believed that Ukraine would become free and if someone disagreed with me, I did not want to have anything to do with that person. Anyone who does not believe in victory believes in failure and becomes a slave, for he dies while he is still alive. Someone said: "look, your occupiers have nuclear weapons – what will you do?" But my reply was such: "nuclear weapons have incredible power and can destroy everything but they have no power to resurrect." A prayer can bring a dead person to life. This happened many times in the lives of the saints. Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky brought back to life a little Jewish child. So, prayer is stronger than a nuclear weapon! And if we have strong faith in God and pray sincerely, nothing will be impossible.

When I was still a child, I already had a firm fighting spirit to do everything to make Ukraine independent and its people happy, to burn myself out and in the meantime, bring light to the people. I thought I would have to physically fight like the Cossacks and Bandera's men. That is why I was constantly playing sports and studied different martial arts. Soon enough, I got myself a gun, learned how to bridle a horse, ride a motorcycle and drive a car, and to dance the hopak, waltz, and polka. I also played the accordion and bass guitar. I did well in school and loved to work. I recorded old patriotic songs and purposefully sang them in front of people. I was encouraging a revolt among them. If I aspired to be a Ukrainian nationalist, I would have to set an example for my people and every human being of different nationalities so that they could hold in their memories something that they saw or heard from me. Besides, the surname itself – Tsar⁸ – inspired me to have my own dignity and be a decent human being and to break with the past for the sake of the future. Just like a bee collects nectar for the people to have honey, I was collecting knowledge to create good things around me. I was

⁷ "Kobzar" is a collection of the best works by the Ukrainian national poet of the nineteenth century, Taras Shevchenko.

⁸ See note 1.

interested in everything and wanted to know everything. I would sit on the bed beside my grandparents and for hours, listen to everything they had to say. They taught me how to trust God and go to church, to love Ukraine, and work honestly.

Our family's biggest tragedy was the past, especially the forceful deportation from our native lands by the Sian river. To leave behind the majestic mountains, the wonderful Sian, the churches where my ancestors had been baptized, their graves, homes, fields, belongings, to be separated from friends and relatives and to find themselves on a freight train without anything is a genocide against the Ukrainian people! Grandpa and grandma told me that the church of the Nativity of Our Lady was blown up by a Polish chauvinist who later hung himself. The big church of St. Nicholas was dismantled by local authorities and replaced with a bank. People were persecuted for the mere fact that they were Ukrainian and that God gave them a fairytale land. The day before the war, the most conscious Ukrainian activists were tortured to death at Hraver's tavern in Lisko. Poles and agents of communist Moscow turned on a loud engine and using the noise as a disguise, viciously murdered eighteen persons. My mom had to quit school when she was in the third grade because her Polish teacher was treating Ukrainian kids cruelly.

Lemkivshchyna, Nadsiania, Kholmshchyna, Pidliashshia (various parts of Ukraine) were burning in fire and flooded with the blood of innocent Ukrainian victims. Anyone manifesting any resistance would be shot dead by Poles or Bolsheviks or tortured at the Yavozhno concentration camp. In the Peremyshl Eparchy of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church on the territory of Poland, forty-one priests were tortured to death, seventy were arrested, and the rest deported; others were forced to flee abroad. Three hundred and sixty-five churches were destroyed and 245 were seized by Roman Catholics. Some one hundred years before the official baptism of Ukraine and Poland, in Krakow and Peremyshl, there had already been two eparchies of the Eastern rite. Now a million people had been deported from their native lands!

An interesting question arises: does a human being have the right to defend himself before occupiers? Of course, yes! "The greatest love you can have for your friends is to give your life for them." (John 15: 13). Yevhen Konovalts, Stepan Bandera, and Roman Shukhevych under extremely difficult conditions, managed to organize the Ukrainian Insurgent Army that stood up for the defense of its people. The famous French President Charles de Gaulle once said: "if I had an army like OUN,⁹ the German boot would not be stomping on my land." I grew up under a communist regime and it was forbidden to respectfully pronounce the name of Stepan Bandera. But for me, Bandera was the standard Ukrainian who did not drink a single time in his whole life or smoke a single cigarette. His wedding was celebrated without a single drop of alcohol. He raised people to fight against Polish chauvinism, German fascism, and Muscovite communism. Let him who has a brain think, and he who is reluctant to do so will see in the other world where those who organized the artificial famine in Ukraine, as well as concentration camps, and who deported people from their native lands, are now.

It's interesting that I have read a couple of times books written by Chekists¹⁰ in which they boasted of their murders. From those books I could learn at least a little bit: who, where, and how heroically lives were given up for Ukraine's freedom. Their deaths gave me even more power to be like them. In the same way, when reading Bolshevikic lies about Sheptytsky, I realized that Metropolitan Sheptytsky is a great Ukrainian saint. Here, the approach is very simple: everything that the occupier is writing about should be read and perceived as the opposite. I am grateful to God that he opened my eyes and let me understand where the truth lies.

I have also witnessed in my life that ordinary people of different nationalities can peacefully coexist without any problems. Wars are initiated by the devil's servants, for in every nation there are spawns who would not be satisfied with owning even half the world. These vampires cannot live without human blood – they work for hell. "The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain." (Genesis 6:6). What a horror! History says that for every 200 years of war, we have only five years of peace. Therefore, my grandpa taught me: "God forbid that you touch

⁹ Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists.

¹⁰ Chekist is a shortening for "*chlen chrezvychno komiteta*", i.e. a member of an extraordinary committee, a committee that dealt with arresting, imprisoning, and murdering "inappropriate" people.

someone first, but if someone touches you, then give him such a response that he will long remember it.” And so I tried to follow his simple suggestion – I fought almost every day. Either I needed to defend myself or stand up for someone.

I was boxing at Dynamo with a talented trainer named David Hrinshpon. I remembered his wise words for the rest of my life: “boxing is not about smashing faces, it’s an art.” And really, a lot of boys who attended his classes later became decent people and found their place in life because they developed their character, will, justice, and courage. And those who were quiet and nice in their youth are only now compensating – they drink, smoke, and beat their wives because they are not capable of something greater, creating hell for their kids at home. There is wisdom in the saying that in a quiet puddle live little devils. And where there is no love between parents, children have a crippled fate, for the parents often let out their anger on their children.

So it was with me. After my brother was born, I felt useless in the house. One step to the left, one step to the right, and I would instantly be punished. I was beaten with various objects and in various places. They would then listen to see if I was still breathing and since I was, they would continue beating me all over again. When they beat me for some serious fault of mine, my memory would easily erase the fault but when they beat me just because I was their eldest child, this stayed with me. I did not want to live and that’s why I pondered over suicide for the first time in the third grade. In the fourth and fifth grades, I used to climb up to the roof of a nine storey building with the intention of jumping down. But before plunging to my death, I found it necessary to pray for the last time the “Our Father,” “Hail Mary,” and to say a prayer to my guardian angel. After the prayers, things always appeared lighter in my eyes, I felt peace inside, and the desire to jump disappeared.

This wild method of upbringing pushed me onto the street. Kids of the same sort gathered there and we would come up with ways of getting into prison. Our main goal was to get drunk and fight. At the age of sixteen, I was registered with the police on a special record. I weighed then eighty-two kilograms and had no idea of what to do with my energy. In a fit of temper, I quit school and went to a factory to work as a locksmith. In one year, I had saved up enough to buy a new Yava¹¹ and was driving it at such a high speed that my neighbour prayed for me to get conscripted into the army so I wouldn’t kill myself in that car. I do regret now that there was no one beside me who would talk to me in a humane way and lead me in the right direction.

Forget about Coming Back – ZABVO¹²

Eight grades of secondary school, unlisted with the Comsomol (Communist) Youth Organization, and registered with the police, meant ZABVO – the Zabaikalsky Military District. In the Chitynsk region among desolate mountains and eighty kilometres from the nearest inhabited area, there stood a garrison of the auto-battalion. Out of one thousand soldiers, six hundred had been in prison before. They were faced with a choice: service in the army or another prison sentence. I was together with completely bald “old men” who were born in 1950 and had been previously imprisoned for five to seven years. There was one guy from Chernivtsi who was thirty-two and for twelve years already, could not find a way to get out of the army. He would always find himself in the disciplinary battalion (a prison for military men). One friend from Tyumen was nicknamed “old guy” because after six years in the disciplinary battalion, he looked like he was fifty. The army was like a gang of outlaws representing thirty-six nationalities! All of them were pure thugs who would walk around carrying knives and some even rifles. They fought, cut each other, hung themselves, or got frozen in the snow while being drunk – in two years more than seventy people perished! And how many more lost their mind?

¹¹ A Soviet car brand.

¹² ZABVO was a widely used pun among prisoners of the Transbaikal Military District which means a practical shortening of the title itself “*Zabaikalsky Viyskovy Okruh*” and an implication of the situation of every single human being who finds himself there: “*Zabud Vernutsia Obratno*” (Rus.) – forget about coming back.

We were taken on a trip to the Zabaikal region for one week to witness with our own eyes the sheer beauty of this region. For me, nothing would ever match the beauty of Lviv. In any case, after some time, we arrived in that untamed area and then, put into a wild banya (a Russian sauna). When marching on the square, we would sing, “hey there on a mountain reapers are reaping...”¹³ Due to the drastic change in climate and way of life, nobody could eat anything for four days and everyone began to resemble prisoners from a concentration camp. We were afraid of laughing lest our mouths would crack. They would then force us to extinguish a forest fire which would continuously burn from spring to autumn. We would extinguish the fire by corralling it with our own boots. Eventually, your boots would catch fire and you would have nowhere to go because everything was ablaze. Indeed, the Soviet Army was an “accomplished bedlam.” At night, you would sleep in the barrack and a few metres from you, all you would see was a raging fire not knowing what would come next.

During the first half of the year, I was studying in Chita to become a cook. One day I would study and on the next, unload freight cars. There was real trouble with the city dwellers, especially those from St. Petersburg. An intelligent person would take into his hands for the first time in his life a spade and not know what to do with it. There would be sacks of grain moving on the escalator and when the turn of that intelligent one came up, he would certainly fall under the weight of that sack with the escalator still moving, instantly creating a crash! Oh how they were punished for that! And then, on the next day, there was school work. If someone fell asleep out of fatigue, the sergeant would call out his name and throw an oak stool at him. If he would be lucky enough to wake up and catch it, than good for him. If not, he would see stars. We were constantly hungry and therefore had to steal wherever and whatever we could just to fill our stomachs. We devoured a loaf of bread and a kilogram of sugar in one second. But the most horrible thing was when we were made to run in the afternoon. With the temperature soaring to 50 degrees Celsius, you would run with your eyes almost leaping out of their sockets, your guts ached of hunger, and you still had to help those who were weaker than you. Those who were caught in the act with a cigarette had to eat a pack of cigarettes in front of everyone else. For smokers, it was easier to bear the hunger because they would fill themselves up with cigarettes. I also felt a compulsion to smoke but once said to myself: “if I do not conquer myself now, than nothing will become of me in this life.” Back in school, I was tempted to become a smoker and it bothered me very much. I came up with my own calculation of how much money would be wasted and decided that it would be better to give this money to the poor. I prayed three times the “Our Father” and “Hail Mary” and God freed me. As Honoré de Balzac once said, “tobacco is harmful to the body, damages the brain, and brings the whole nation to stupidity.”

Besides this, there were de-mobs in the barrack. They were the demobilized ones who were awaiting trial after they had beaten up a whole cinema hall of people in revenge for their buddy. They would drink every night, put a young “ghost” soldier at the door and throw knives around him from a distance. There was wild screaming, whistling, fighting, singing, and dancing. Those de-mobs were brave and gallant, stout, sporty, tidy, and big boys – mostly Rusyns and Ukrainians. On my third day of service, I got into a skirmish with one of them after which they suggested that I beat up one bastard who had betrayed them earlier. Afterwards, they invited me to their get-together – to drink a dental elixir without snacking. It would be improper of me to refuse before such company. I did what they did. I drank and felt as if I was about to give birth to a lobster. So I thought, here I will give birth to it...

I would spend time in Soviet Havana which in those days had the most horrible disciplinary battalion. I would never forget the day when I saw a group of sentenced soldiers and a convoy of machine guns and wolf hounds. This was no movie. I saw hell on earth...

In half a year, I returned to the forest to work as a cook in a garrison where the majority of prisoners came from central Asia. The position was serious and the responsibility, even more so. Every day I had to feed approximately one thousand people. On the first night, the Asians came and took all the meat. The same incident reoccurred on the second and third nights. After the third night, I reported this problem to the commander on duty. Being a Bolshevik, he looked at me like a wolf and said: “where are you from?” To this I responded by saying: “from Lviv.” He looked back at me and muttered:

¹³ Beginning of a well-known Ukrainian folk song.

“this is no Bandera-land¹⁴ for you here...” I was speechless. As it turned out, he did not care that the whole garrison was without meat. The only thing he cared about was Soviet power! I realized that I would have to take the entire situation under my own hands. It just so happened to be the day when the military comsomol organizer¹⁵ stole my hat. I came up to him and snatched it from his head. He called his whole bunch over, a group of twenty tribe-members and they saw me off to the “Lenin room” to teach me a lesson or two. The comsomol organizer grabbed me by the scruff of the neck. Luckily, I had learnt in early childhood a move that could be applied for such situations and had mastered it so that it was already second nature by then. A devoted Lenin disciple flew headfirst into the tribune while I hit their kingpin in the eye and took a nearby table into my hands to knock them all down. Finally, I grabbed the strongest of them, threw him down, and began choking him. The Asians saw that his eyes were popping out and they jumped away and asked me to leave him alone.

I came to the dining hall with the guys rushing to me from the whole garrison, even those older, asking me how it all went. And I asked them: “why are you running? Come over tonight to my barrack and we will sort things out with them.” The guys were really cool, especially the ones from Tyumen. Former prisoners, they came and in the darkness, a grandiose fight erupted. It was difficult to discern who was beating whom and we stopped at the point when it was decided that I should go together with the organizer to the washing-stand to fight him one on one. And so we entered, he closed the door and mumbled something to me. I hit him with my left hand even though I am right-handed. After that, it was like a scene straight from the movies: the door and its frame flew away followed by the organizer. Since that incident, nobody had anything against me right up until the end of my service and the power in the garrison was passed over to the whites. The Asians got what they deserved for their horrible mockery of the whites. Once during a raid, they closed themselves up in the boiler-house only to have the Tyumen Cossacks roll a tank with petrol to it, break a window, pour petrol into it, and put the house on fire. The Asians jumped out of the boiler-house like devils from hell and the guys would go on “extinguishing” them. Some of them would hide out in huts in the forests with their fellow countrymen from headquarters delivering them documents of exemption from army service.

But I did not take an active part in those rotten fights because that was not for me. Meanwhile, I made order in the dining hall. I installed locks on all doors. Those that were extra, I welded up. I left only a tiny opening through which one could slide only a pot with grab. I made sure the cooks were cooking tasty food. It was not an easy thing to do for if a wretch is hungry, he does not care that someone else has nothing to eat. Therefore, not once did I have to pommel my kitchen mates. The responsibility was incredible because various groups of people would come to the kitchen for a slice of meat: bandits, thieves, criminals, fellow countrymen, officers, and others. I would also watch closely to see if those miserable ones that were constantly being bullied for their food were not deprived of their bread. Every time I saw injustice, I would attack that gang of thieves and fight them to death. Soon, the fights became part of my daily routine and a day without them was like a waste.

I understood that such a gang was a creation of the communist system; this was done on purpose to direct one human against another. It was in the army that I understood that every nation has wonderful people and each has its own villains. Everything in the world is divided into two. Once we were sitting with a bunch of guys in a room and chatting. Suddenly, one of them said: “look, there are eight of us here, and we all are of different nationalities!” We were all quite amazed.

¹⁴ “Banderivshchyna” or “Bandera-land” is a whole phenomenon in the twentieth century history of Ukraine, often referred to (as it is here) with a pejorative connotation. Named after Stepan Bandera, one of the two leaders of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists that functioned in Ukraine in the 1930s and 1940s, especially active during World War II. In their program documents (adopted in April 1941 in Krakow, Poland), OUN members declared free human rights in society and state and the necessity of combining the fight for the independence of Ukraine with the fight for other nations in the USSR. But the same documents presented the anti-Semitic direction of the Bandera movement, declared the fight against Jews who were considered the foundation for Soviet power and Moscow imperialism. The antinomy of certain actions and views, multiplied by historic mythology, gave birth to a pejorative nick-name “banderivets” (a Bandera man) usually in reference to western Ukrainians, based on stereotypic memory, used mainly by eastern Ukrainians or those with strong leftist socialist views.

¹⁵ “Comsorg” is short for “comsomol organizer,” the person responsible for various public activities in the Soviet youth organization.

I remember two horse thieves from Kyrgyzstan who were both born in 1952 and sat in prison for five years. Mykola Foursenko was a real hefty guy since he could raise a 120 kilogram bar-bell. The other one, Makhmud Shehaliyev, was Azerbaijani. They were both inseparable, would stand up for one another even if it meant death, and intimidated the entire brigade within a 300 kilometre radius. They robbed half the Soviet Army and returned home with heavy suitcases. One day, they came up to me and said: “we’ve been watching you for a long time and we know that you are from Lviv – a Bandera man. At school, we were told quite different things on this issue. Explain to us who those Bandera men really are.” I explained. The guys grasped it all at once. I then realized that every human being is a representative of his or her own nation and therefore must stand accountable to this.

I had a friend from Siberia whose name was Sashko Vasilyev and who was born in 1950. He had previously sat in prison for seven years. He had a wife and a child but was also an accomplished rogue and a good jester. Everyone was afraid of him because he could show a knife in front of a whole group of people and promise his fellow comrade that he would stab him with that knife. Once he stabbed one soldier in the buttocks and on another occasion, after a good drinking bout, got a rifle in the middle of the night and began shooting at the lamp-shades in the barrack. He was not punished for that but would have to go and buy new ones. We traveled together with the “old folk” to go shopping, on “samovolka,”¹⁶ eighty kilometres away. We “packed” a case of tushonka¹⁷ and then drank without stopping. Later on, we would pay a visit to one prisoner who had already been freed but used to sit together with Sashko. That guy, Vania, was twenty-seven and had sat in prison for twelve years. Innocent-looking, he was a joyful and kind man but would say: “what shall I do here? In prison, they will at least give me some food.” In two years time, he was sentenced to two years for slacking off. His old mother lived in the house with him and the two of them had only stinky sprat and shriveled potatoes to eat. I remembered this horror all my life. And my friend Sasha was on his way home when sentenced to another eight years for having stabbed someone on the train. I felt pity for him because he showed good characteristics but the communist system continued working against him.

There was also a whole bunch of loiterers who would teach everyone that it is better to rest in summer than to work in winter. Such a faker would rub his hand, thump it against something, and then for half a year walk with a bandage. For the other half year, he would put a bandage on his other hand with his service resuming. But there was one faker who was the epitome of all the fakers – a guy from Irkutsk. He studied to become a welder and then “went blind.” He was taken to the hospital on three occasions to undergo examinations and on all three occasions, the doctors claimed that he could see. We however, saw something different. Our blind comrade had a leader who would take him to the dining hall, restroom, to the bath, etc. We were all indignant about this: how can one torture a human being in such a way! On another day, I sat in front of him in the dining hall and gazed at him straight in the face. Honestly, the blind eyes were glassy, food was given to him, and he did not react to me. Blind indeed! But once he walked along a wall, touch after touch, to a dark changing room where the guys were drinking black tea.¹⁸ One German guy, Werwein, silently came up to the blind guy and lifted his fist against him. The blind guy reacted promptly and protected himself with his hands. He could suddenly see! For one year he was blind and now he could see! The guys lambasted him properly for playing this sham. After such a beating he refused to eat which posed another problem. I then took him to work with me in the kitchen. I spoke to him calmly, and the poor guy started to eat. Actually, for such artistic abilities, he truly deserved a special medal.

Hryhoriy (Hryshko) Panchenko was from Kyrgyzstan. He used to say that his father walked on foot all the way to Sumy in order to see his native Ukraine before eventually dying of homesickness and longing. Hryshko taught me how to drink black tea. At first I spat it out because of the bitter taste but then got used to it and even became a black tea addict. A pack of tea dissolved in a 350 gram mug! You take a sip and then nirvana – a state of utter indifference. A Soviet soldier had a salary of 3.62 rubles – this was exactly how much a bottle of vodka cost. After every pay day, they brought us chests

¹⁶ “Samovolka” is a slang word that means to leave a military unit without permission.

¹⁷ Russian slang word for canned stewed meat.

¹⁸ “Chyfir” in Ukrainian, a strong concentration of tea. Usually the prisoners would use a whole 100-150 g pack of tea for one mug.

of vodka and if there were out of vodka, than eau-de-cologne. Two shot glasses were enough to make a soldier ready for heroic deeds. There would be 140 persons in our military group and the aroma would be like in a perfume factory. Officers would do the same, for they were sent from all over the world to ZABVO until the end of their military service for violating army discipline. Comrade Brezhnev said that the best conditions for life are in the Chita region and that nobody is ever transferred from there to anywhere else. A thief is recognized by the first word he pronounces when he comes out to speak from a tribune and says: “Tovar – ishchi!”¹⁹ In reality, 25% of oxygen was missing in the air, and be it winter or summer, with the temperature reaching 50 degrees Celsius, one gasps the air as if it were his last. It smelled of some kind of plastic. You breathed in and nothing entered your lungs. Glory to the Party! This is why people were sent there for penal servitude and we were sent to build the Baikal-Amur Railway.

On more than one occasion we found ourselves to be in a situation where we had to cook cabbage three times a day for two weeks – boiled, stewed, fried. The menu was just wonderful: goulash along the corridor, vidbyvni against your liver,²⁰ etc. Sometimes we ran out of salt or tea, and the reason was very simple – the suppliers and warrant officers would get drunk on their way back with the provisions. In February, temperatures dipped to -56 degrees Celsius. With that kind of temperature, you live as if in a morgue. I was often frozen throughout my body. I could only open my eyes and the rest was all numb. You could only move your body down to the waist and the legs would just refuse to budge. From that time until today, I still have to dance the hopak²¹ for half the night because my legs suffer cramps.

Officers drank out of grief that they had put themselves into such trouble and they treated the soldiers as cruelly as they possibly could. They would push someone out on the square in the morning to freeze or release a German shepherd to have you run for as long as you can. The last one lagging behind would end up in the hound’s teeth. It was horror! At night you could not sleep because you would worry that they would come in the morning with the ferocious dog. Former prisoners used to say: “it’s better to spend three years in prison than two in such an army.” The worst times however, were to come after we had already served for a year and a half. A real war erupted and we would attack each other, especially at night. I also got my share for standing in defense of one countryman. This happened when we were celebrating somebody’s birthday. I was very drunk. I was fighting alone with those scoundrels who could not cope with me until one of them crept up to me from behind and hit me on the head with a brick. I experienced “ventilation”²² and fell down. Then I was kicked severely, as they said, to the “condition of a stewed apple.” The next day no one could recognize me because I looked like a dark-blue beet root and the sight was simply indescribable. Guys from Chernivtsi came – Ivan Tsybulsky, Kolia Lilenko, Borys Kryzhanivsky, and others, looking to get revenge for me and yet, I refused. If I had to, I would attend to them by myself and to myself I made for the first time in my life the following conclusion: “I should not have drank so much.” It was only then that I realized the meaning of my grandpa’s words, that vodka can turn the wisest into the most foolish and the strongest, into the weakest and most vulnerable. But unfortunately, this thumping was not yet enough for me. “The military actions would go on...”

There was one scoundrel who would from time to time get out of his dungeon, a turner’s workshop, and could in one night kill three to five guys. A gang composed of different nationalities from central Asia was assisting him. Like a pack of beasts, they would attack one person and practice on him their unspeakable brutality. They were real thugs. Once they attacked a very decent guy, broke his jaw, fractured his skull, but what’s worst, they also raped him. I gathered my guys and said that even if we end up in prison, we just must put an end to this gang. There were twenty-five of us, decent Cossacks. We divided ourselves into three groups and went to the barracks. We beat all the scoundrels as well as

¹⁹ “Tovar–ishchi!” is a pun. The word itself is a common address of any Soviet leader to the people, it means “comrades.” At the same time, if you split a word, like it is done here, it says “commodity – search for it!” which sounds like a command for hounds to look for something to steal. In English, one might translate it as “come rats!” instead of “comrades!”

²⁰ Goulash and vidbyvni are meat dishes. These two words however, call to mind Ukrainian verbs which have similar roots – *huliaty* and *vidbyvaty*, i.e. to walk and to beat.

²¹ A Ukrainian folk dance.

²² Lost consciousness, plus was ventilated literally, i.e. there was a hole the size of a finger made in the head.

our countrymen who lived according to the principle “my hut is on the outskirts.”²³ We managed to catch that Asian man who had done the raping. He was a beast on two legs. We kicked him so hard that we ruined our leather boots.

All three groups gathered on the square and in the middle of the night started singing “Ukraine’s glory has not yet perished...”²⁴ It was December 14, 1978. The startled officers jumped out and began to shoot because the Bandera men had attacked the Zabaikal. Nine of us were taken away and the tortures began. Drunken officers took off our clothes and scorched us with hot iron, beat us with cables, then poured water onto us while shouting: “we will show you an independent Ukraine!” They were not interested in the cause of the fight but wanted to punish us for singing the national anthem of Ukraine. We were not allowed to sleep or eat and would undergo a series of tortures. One officer even suggested squeezing needles under our nails, but they did not have any at hand. On the third day it felt like we were almost finished. Then they allowed us to drink water. We were getting drunk from that water because our bodies were so exhausted. We sat in the punishment cell at night talking about death. I was exactly twenty years old then. And suddenly, I remembered my aunt who had said seven years earlier that I would become a great person one day. This cheered me up and I said that I had to survive, for otherwise this prophecy would not come true. Next day, a doctor came to us and asked us to show him our burns. We were released.

We owed our salvation to the wives of some decent officers who made a great deal of commotion, horrified by the possibility that one day their own kids could find themselves in such an army. A prosecutor-colonel came from Moscow. The butchers started to ask for forgiveness with tears in their eyes because they all had small children. They promised us that we would be the first to be released from service in the army. I asked the guys not to petition anything and said: “let God be their judge, not us.” The prosecutor got mad but we stood firm with our decision. Later, after finishing my service in the army, I found out that one of those officers was again scorching a soldier with hot iron, and then he was simply demoted from his position. He was a wretched Bolshevik turned animal.

Once I happened to be standing at the distributor when a drunk officer on duty from the garrison came up to me and said that I was distributing food the wrong way. From then on, the younger cooks always asked me to distribute dinner because I was good at doing this – working with a big spoon for about two hours to make sure that all the 1000 or 1200 people had gotten enough. I explained to him that I had good practice and knew how to carry out the task. I turned back to the 500 litre cauldron and started working again because I was pressed for time only to have this cad hit me right in my kidneys. I turned back and pushed him. He fell right into the toilet. I lifted him up, put his cap on his head, seized him by the scruff of the neck, and pushed him out. He went to the battalion commander to complain and the latter, seeing that his whole back was covered in excrement, instantly referred him to the “clink.”

Officers would often come to me for meat and so, more than once, I made a condition that they had to free someone or stop mocking and beating someone in order to get some. After that, some guys would come up to me not knowing how to pay me back. I always responded in a joking way by saying: “when you come home, go to church and light a candle for me.” On many occasions I remembered these candles after service in the army, wondering if they were the ones that saved me. I was not sure if this was the case because I always tried to do good and stand up for the weak.

After I had left that torturous place, a great anxiety permeated into the world of military affairs. And at this point the Lord sent me assistance. My friend Mykola Kostrytsky came from the disciplinary battalion. We used to live in the same neighbourhood, were both hooligans at home, and were both placed at the same Soviet concentration camp. Nobody could tell us apart because we looked so much alike and this provided for some funny situations. Once a major entered the bread-slicing room and said: “Kostrytsky, what are you doing here after the disciplinary battalion?” And in the bread-slicery they also divided butter and sugar. I replied that I was checking the portions. He roared back and it took him

²³ It refers to a Ukrainian saying which rhymes in the original: my hut is at the end of the village and I do not want to know anything. The essential message is that some people refuse to take an active part in what is going on around, usually out of fear or wishing to avoid extra troubles.

²⁴ First line of the Ukrainian national anthem.

a long time to believe that my surname was Tsar. In the same way, Mykola found himself in a number of interesting situations.

Mykola and I were brought up oppositely: he never said a word of Ukrainian, and I, never a word of Russian. We were two extremes that God brought together to teach one another some wisdom. Both of us were extremely eager to fight, loved freedom, justice, and could stand up for one another even if it meant death! If I happened to get candy, I would carry it in my pocket until I met Mykola to share it with him. In the same way, Mykola came to me at 3 am, woke me up, and shared his orange with me. Such were the times and this happens only once in life. With Mykola's arrival, the Asians were put back in their place.

Three months before demobilization, we went to a nearby river to go fetch some ice for our freezer that was full of produce. Not far from us we saw in the forest two "spirits."²⁵ They told us that they were sent to cut a bunch of birch branches to make brooms. We took them to a car to help us chop ice. Driving back, we saw that the battalion commander was coming our way. He came and asked for the "spirits." We let them out of the car and the colonel started beating them. We got furious and asked: "what's the matter?" He said: "they killed Kolia Minovshchikov." The "spirits" were sitting in the "clink" as a punishment for something, and then asked Kolia to accompany them to wash the lavatories. The bastards hit Kolia on the neck with scrap-iron and threw his body into an "eye,"²⁶ and then ran away into the forest. Kolia was an only child and lived with his mother in Irkutsk. He was petite like a child. The commandants were sending him for food to the dining hall. I always made sure that he ate enough. It was impossible to get angry with him – and suddenly, such a horrible death. What would his poor mother have to go through? She walked around the garrison like a shadow. We were beating those "spirits" severely, but what was the point if we couldn't get little Kolia's life back?

"Military actions" lasted until the last day. I had a dzigan²⁷ behind the night-table and a knife under my pillow. Actually, the upper part of the bed could be easily separated and was convenient for man-to-man fighting. Next to me slept Dmytro Maksymchuk from Vyzhnytsia who was known to keep an axe under his bed. At night, we took turns standing on duty in the barrack for one hour, protecting the rest from an unexpected attack of the nasty enemy. I could only dream that if God allowed me to return home, only then would I be able to have a good night's sleep. The time for demobilization came, but I wanted to stay a little longer in order to go home with Mykola. But he said that because of the disciplinary battalion, he might be detained for even longer, and our relatives at home would be worrying because both of us would not be coming back. I left, understanding that Mykola was staying alone in hell. After another fight, he was sentenced to five years in prison. He was being detained twenty kilometres from the Chinese border in horrible conditions. Nevertheless, he had enough courage in him one day to say: "it was easier there than in the army..."

I was being transferred from the concentration camp summoning myself to take one last look at the savage Zabaikal knolls. I asked myself: "can there be another life in this world?!" I forgot about coming back to ZABVO. They threw us out of the bus at a station in the forest with nobody willing to take us back onto the train. We spent one day and night at the train station and then, miraculously, came a freight train with one passenger car to be repaired. We paid and traveled to Voronezh. There were five of us, two without money. I told my countrymen: "let's collect some money so that they also have something to eat." One refused to pitch in. I told them: "guys, open the window and let's throw this skunk out." He then gave in. I bought food for everyone and twice a week we ate only a little bit, because there might not have been enough. Then I saw that one fellow was stealing food. I asked: "what are you doing jerk?" Once because of him, I had been beaten up and this is how he expressed his gratitude to me. You live and learn, and then you die an old man.

Six times in my lifetime I had God's fortune of crossing the Baikal region and see its incredible beauty. We were traveling by train and below we saw a cloud. I thought: "what can this be?" Slowly,

²⁵ Military service in the Soviet Army lasted for two years, and the soldiers designed their own levels of experience: newcomers were called "spirits," those who had served for half a year became "sprats," after one year of service one would belong to the group of "scoops," after one and a half years – "old men", and finally before demobilization – "de-mobs."

²⁶ Toilet hole.

²⁷ An iron heavy T-form tool usually used for chopping ice or digging solid ground.

on winding mountain roads, the train descended and stopped on the shores of Lake Baikal. The bottom of the lake was visible as far as the eye could see. Old ladies were standing on the platform and selling hot potatoes with dill. I thanked them and heard my native Ukrainian language: “where are you from children?” they asked. “From Lviv,” we said. Tears flowed from their faces. How horrible was it to meet in Baikal, Chita, Khabarovsk, Komsomolsk-upon-Amour, and Sovhavan, people who had to leave picturesque Ukraine and find themselves in such a wild world! If you see a white house and good order around it, you should know that this is where Ukrainians live. I also saw villages where cranes stood over the wells. I talked to those people and they treated me to some food, and inside my soul was wincing: “how can one live in this world and not see dear Ukraine?” It’s better to die...

We reached Voronezh and then by postal train to Kharkiv. In Kharkiv, we were caught by commandants who looked at our military IDs and as soon as they read that we were from the Baikal region, they looked at us with surprise and let us go without saying a word. Then we traveled to Lviv, again by postal train. I quickly learnt how to sort out and distribute mail. For that I was given a meal twice a day. And traveling in this way for ten days and nights, I reached Lviv. I got out of the train, took two steps, saw my native city, and suddenly there was darkness in my eyes, as if night had befallen in the middle of the day. I twisted my head, blinked my eyes, and my sight came back. I just could not believe that I was home and alive. I went home on foot as if flying with wings. I rang the doorbell and the reply from inside was: “whom does the devil bring at this hour?” I went numb, looked down the stairs, but where would I go? I remembered the Baikal...

For two weeks I did not leave home and did not know what had happened to me. I looked at people and could not understand how they could be joyful, for there, 9000 kilometres away, there was real hell and it was there that I had left Mykola. Everybody was asking me about my service and I said: “if not for God, I would have never returned alive.” Before departing for military service, my grandpa came up to me at the station and said: “don’t go to bed without saying a prayer, not even once.” And really, I sincerely prayed to God every day, for myself and for Mykola. Miraculously, I made it home alive. Ostarbeiters²⁸ are given big compensation for their stay in Germany. Perhaps I should write somewhere too and maybe they will pay me some day for staying at a Soviet concentration camp, granting me documentation of a war veteran. Why not? The world is changing, and anything can happen...

To Gain Victory over oneself

For two years, I would see that army in my dreams. I would get up in the middle of the night, scream, and for a while, I would not be able to come to my senses and realize where I was. I was also stammering very much and it seemed to me that I had lived not twenty, but eighty years. My nerves were shattered. I was afraid to drink alcohol, for I felt that I was more like a beast than a human and could become a cause of great calamity. And so it happened. In a year, I met the guy whom I had always defended in the army and he, as a way of expressing his gratitude, got me and a whole company of guys drunk. One fellow started fighting another and I tried to break them apart, and they began to attack me. The ending this time was tragic. The police began looking for me, and I hid in the attic amid hay. Just back from a concentration camp and I was facing a new prison sentence for many long years. For three days I did not eat or drink anything. I thought I would go crazy. Prayer saved me. I was screaming to heaven: “God, save me from this calamity and I promise that I will never drink vodka and serve you until death!”

God heard the cries of my soul and everything ended happily. My grandpa said: “go to church and you will feel relieved.” I went and people crossed the street to avoid greeting me. How difficult was it for me to go through this! Why did nobody wonder who started the fight, instead everybody saw only the one who ended it? This was a constant problem in my life, a great injustice indeed. I entered the church and fell on my knees near the altar. I was praying so hard that the men started looking back at me. My soul was crying to the Lord! During the Service I felt weightless and saw light in my head.

²⁸ The people who were forced to work in Germany during World War II. In the late 1990’s, most of them received compensation from the German government.

This light started coming down my body and I was entirely transformed. I felt relieved in my soul. I felt an incredible joy. It was a miracle from God! As I left the church I was thinking: “let this week pass quickly so that I can come for Divine Liturgy again.” I felt compassion and warmth in the holy temple.

I went to church regularly and became a bit more careful, because I felt that for the smallest misdeed, I might find myself in prison. I wanted to change my life in order to avoid prison but I got into trouble and put myself into a shameful situation. Unfortunately, more than once after that, I repeatedly betrayed my Lord and found myself in hopeless situations. It is impossible to imagine what my grandparents and family members suffered because of me, how much money and energy they devoted, and how much shame they experienced...The parents of my peers would advise their children to stay away from me. I knew and saw all of this. Once, I was talking to a girl after a dance. I said: “look what a wonderful sky, stars, and moon.” And in reply I heard: “will you stab me with your knife?” I was stunned, turned back, and left.

In 1980, I went with the guys to Kazakhstan to earn some money, not because there was any particular need to do so, but because I wanted to run away somewhere. There, I found myself in an interesting situation along with my buddy. Put simply, we were taken 250 kilometres into a wild steppe and left there. We did all the work in one day but nobody came to pick us up. Two herdsman were pasturing 600 horses. It was quite a sight to see this herd running around the steppe. We were given something to eat once a day but soon ran out of food. We ended up eating meat from which we had to scrape worms first. Eventually, we ran out of water with the mercury soaring to 50 degrees Celsius. We saw that our end was approaching and something had to be done.

We went to look for a haymaking place in the steppe – there had to be salvation there. We got lost but then prayed, and with God’s help, we found the right way. We could already see the haymaking place but had no strength to walk. With the unbearable heat and no saliva in the mouth, we couldn’t even carry the uniforms in our hands. Ravens were flying above us as if we were their prey. My friend said: “the ravens will eat us and mom won’t even know what happened to me.” Weakened, we collapsed. I whispered silently in my soul: “Lord, have mercy!” And at that instant, a truck that was bringing water came to the haymaking place. We couldn’t do anything but blink. The truck stopped, they threw us onto the back of the truck, and drove. At the haymaking place we were each given a bowl of borshch,²⁹ which we could not finish for forty-five minutes. Our stomachs were not functioning anymore. God saved us miraculously!

In a separate incident one night, a military KrAZ³⁰ almost ran over me. The driver was blinded by the glare of a car coming from the opposite side of the road. In one second, an invisible power drew me back and I saw a ditch. I jumped to the side and stayed alive. The KrAZ only bumped me on the back. My guardian angel had saved me. I thought then that maybe the Lord wanted me to live longer even though I was not happy with this world.

When I was twenty-three years old, I felt that I would die. I went through everything – darkness was behind and in front of me. I saw no light and felt that my life was mangled and wasted and that I was a cursed man. Then, a group of counselors appeared and told me things I should not have known. I decided to kill. With much effort, I tricked a friend into the house and started questioning him. Seconds were left to the tragedy and then suddenly, came God’s providence! Heavenly light shone into my eyes, enlightening me throughout. I even smiled and felt incredible peace, lightness, warmth, and brightness in my mind. A silent voice said: “it’s all vanity, and the world is not without good people. You will still have your good fortune in life.”

Once, after another drinking bout, I was sitting in a tavern and saw under the windows a “bruise,”³¹ who was wandering with a mug like the sole of a shoe. Shall I also drink myself to the condition of such despair? No, for I am a Cossack and a Bandera man! I banged my fist against the table and left the tavern. “It is a human thing to sin, for a Christian to rise from sin and for the devilish to remain in sin.” (St. Augustine). I remembered what kind of man I was at sixteen when I was boxing and could have easily beaten five “big bosses.” And once, before the army, I even fought twenty. With

²⁹ A Ukrainian traditional soup made of beetroot and other vegetables, usually served with some meat.

³⁰ Trade mark of a Soviet truck.

³¹ A folk name for an advanced drunkard.

this in mind, I firmly decided to get back in shape by the age of twenty-five. As a result, I trained daily for three to four hours, both at home and at work. Afterwards, I would run for twelve to fifteen kilometres. On top of this, I could walk well on my hands. In all honesty, I did not know what else I was capable of doing with my strength. Several times during a horrible snowstorm, the training bars were frozen and covered with ice as I stood in chest-deep snow. In such weather one would not let a dog out, and I said to myself: “if I do not do these exercises now, than nothing will become of me in this life.” People were staring at me thinking that I was a wacko.

Once, I sensed an incredibly beastly strength inside of me as my nervous system was feeling weak. Whenever something went wrong, I immediately went ablaze like a match. And so, I firmly decided to better myself spiritually in order to find a balance between spirit and body. Ever since 1982, an old man by the name of Pavlo Mykytyn from the village of Zaluzhzhia in Yavoriv, has worked with me and has always talked to me about religion. He was born in 1917 but the communists did not count his twenty-two years of work in the collective farm, and so he was compelled to work until he was seventy in order to be able to receive his pension. What’s more, Pavlo was held captive by the Germans for six years. After that, he was transported to Yakutia³² but managed to flee. Later, the communists imprisoned him for two more years. Thus, after the five years of our friendship, I graduated from the highest possible course on the history of one man’s difficulties in life. Also, an old convict who had been imprisoned for twenty-four years was working with me. He was a well-read man, and so, I had a lot to listen to.

When a feast day befell on a weekday, I would come to my boss and tell him that the following day I would not be at work, for I had to attend Divine Liturgy at church. My boss blinked and reluctantly agreed since I was doing my work well. If I had to be fired for this, I would have quit the job and have still gone to church. Even on days when it was raining cats and dogs, I found a way to get to church. Sometimes a blizzard would sweep everything up and I would get lost. I saw that I was standing in the middle of a field. Standing tired, feeling sorry and bitter, I looked for the road and went forward again because in front of me was the holy church and there – Jesus.

On one occasion, some elderly people were walking ahead of me and I heard them speaking about a Jew who once said: “you Ukrainians are very hardworking people and with only some strengthening of your faith, nothing would stand in your way and you would be unconquerable.” I took these words as armour for myself.

A Sign from God

During those years, I played bass guitar at weddings, in restaurants, and in houses of culture.³³ At school, I learnt to play the accordion and liked to sing Ukrainian songs very much. There were no TVs or VCRs back then. As a result, people sang a great deal. I liked to bring people joy and could sing all night long with no song being repeated twice. In a restaurant in the city of Komarno, I became acquainted with musicians who came from the Kost family of eleven children. I soon found myself in their home and saw their heroic mother whose name was Olena. This respectful and outstanding Ukrainian woman hailed from the city of Peremyshl. For the first time in my life, she gave me the feeling of being needed. I sort of felt as if I were the twelfth child of her big musical family. I would constantly learn from Olena, at night and during the day. We had a lot to talk about. This person, with God’s providence, changed my entire life. I started to guard myself from committing another “heroic deed.” The love and kindness of these people inspired in me a new life.

Olena’s grandchildren were especially close to me and asked me if I could speak to them about God. It was with great happiness that I began teaching them catechism for the first time in my life, a

³² It is a well-known fact that the Soviet regime considered German captives traitors of their motherland and the destiny of those who returned home was even worse than the captivity: they were punished for “giving in to the enemy.” Numerous facts of such punishment are presented in Solzhenitsyn’s “Gulag Archipelago.”

³³ A piece of Soviet reality. Every village, small town or any other settlement, usually had a house of culture (big cities had a couple of those) where people could entertain, practice acting, watch movies (only those that they were allowed), sing, recite poetry, etc.

journey of learning which ended with the children's first confession. After first Holy Communion, I felt that I had entrusted the children and their destiny to God's hands.

Once on a Saturday evening, Olena told me that her blood pressure had risen to 200 and that there was no medicine readily available. At that same instant, my inner voice commanded me to get up from the sofa and put my hands on her head. I began to resist. Then, an invisible power simply pushed me from the sofa as I muttered the words: "can I put my hands on your head?" Olena smiled and said that I could. I came up to her and with my entire soul prayed for God to give her health. Olena stood up and said: "what did you do? My head stopped aching!" We were both very much surprised by this.

I went home that night thinking about what had happened. I started praying the Lord's prayer and suddenly saw Jesus Christ in the sky in shining gold. He had a crown on His head and in his right hand, He was holding up a cross. The sky was pure, with some stars but no moon. I came home, prayed, and went to bed. In the morning I opened my eyes, looked through the window, and again saw Jesus Christ in the sky. I jumped out to the backyard and started rubbing my eyes, thinking that I was covered in some kind of shroud. But no – I was truly seeing it! I went to church and from there, straight to Olena. Afterwards, I cured four children of their diseases. I suddenly sensed in my hands a strong feeling for the sick areas as warmth started coming from my hands as I prayed over a human being.

The vision lasted for two weeks and then disappeared. Despite my numerous attempts to bring it back, nothing worked and I would never see it again. During this time I cured five people. An invisible voice kept on telling me that if you have strong faith in God, nothing will be impossible for you. I realized that I needed to change my life and to serve God. I arrived at this conclusion in March of 1984 when I was just twenty-five! I remembered that before I went to the army, I had beaten up one guy. I was working hard for one month doing two shifts to earn some money for my send-off party³⁴ and now had to give it all up. The police were constantly on the lookout for me and I saw no end in sight. Nobody asked who started the fight. This injustice tortured me so much that I glanced at the clear blue sky and cried out to the Lord: "God, how long is this injustice going to last for in this world?" And suddenly I heard a voice that said: "until you're twenty-five." I went numb. Seven years passed since I began praying for a better destiny and the time had come to start a new life.

Once in my childhood, I saw how a beautiful apple tree withered in our neighbour's garden. Everybody was saying that one old lady gave it the "evil eye." I thought about it many times and said to myself: "Lord, please give me such eyes that from my look the apple tree will start blooming again and people will become healthy and full of kindness and love." Sick people were coming to me every day, especially at work. I helped everyone with great joy. At that time, one man came up to me and said: "God gave you this talent free of charge and you should be helping people free of charge." It was difficult for me to conquer myself because I was tempted to feel and do otherwise and people would not understand. Nonetheless, I insisted on continuing with my policy – to do good without making profit. Once they brought me a taxi driver who was all twirled up because of chronic lower back pain. In twenty minutes he was already standing upright. He withdrew a thick wallet from his pocket and said: "here, take something for tea." I refused and said: "please, take this money and one day give a lift to a poor person who has no strength to walk. This way you will reward me in a better way." All he did was just stare at me.

That same year, I gathered twenty-five guys in Lviv by the Lesia Ukrayinka Cinema and for one hour, encouraged them to create a special organization whose members would go to church together, help one another, fight for justice and help Ukraine become a free country. I hardly finished my speech when the guys had already dragged a box of wine to celebrate the event. They drank until they lost consciousness and I saw that one of them was already crawling. I thought to myself, with such bondmen one can hardly do anything for Ukraine. Only half as many people came for the second meeting and again there was drinking. And for the third meeting, only a couple of people showed up. From that point until the rest of my life, I firmly decided to fight for the idea of a better destiny for Ukraine on my own. If God is with me, than who is against me? And I was right in my calculations.

³⁴ In the original "provody," i.e. a special party (usually involving a lot of drinking with friends) before leaving for military service.

I went to Pochaiv for the first time in 1986. I was walking through a forest with three other women when out of no where, a strong scent of heavenly aroma enveloped us! We started smelling flowers and trees, not knowing where the lovely smell was coming from. We prayed for three consecutive days, for twelve to fourteen hours each day. We got on the bus to go back home when the same aroma suddenly returned! It was as if someone had spilt a bucket of heavenly perfumes on the bus and yet, only the four of us were able to smell it. It was then that we realized that the Holy Virgin of Pochaiv was greeting us and then seeing us off.

What happiness it was to see the Pochaiv monastery and its golden domes reaching high into the sky, the Holy Virgin's footprint,³⁵ and to feel God's incredible grace...It's impossible to put it in words. I often went there and prayed for the Holy Mother to take me under her protection. I have a godson there and good people who are dear to me and have done a lot for me, educated me, and showed me how to love God and serve Him.

In the Lavra (Major Monastery), I saw for the first time in my life a monk who was standing like Moses. My body shuddered, tears burst from my eyes and deep in my soul, I roared: "God, why can't I serve You, why have I wasted my life, why do I need this world, this folly?" One godly monk suggested that I move to Pochaiv. I would have done this with great pleasure if not for the Muscovite policy and my Ukrainian heart!³⁶

Some time before, I was greatly touched by the funeral of Patriarch Josyf Slipyj that was broadcasted over the radio from the Vatican. The floor was wet from my tears and my heart was screaming to follow in the footsteps of this great man, to walk the path of Metropolitan Sheptytsky, Konovalets, Bandera, Shukhevych, and all those who gave their life for the independence of Ukraine. I could not find a place for myself in this world. The Bolshevik system "got me in the very root" with its devilish ideology and I was looking forward to the end of the world. In 1986, I heard in my dreams the distinct voice of Jesus Christ who proclaimed: "the end of the world is quickly approaching but you should live like a normal person." This calmed me down somewhat.

Sambir

In those years, I often engaged in conversations with Protestants who gave me Bibles to distribute amongst my friends. I was usually compensated with money, but this too proved to be problematic. I once set out on such a mission to a Protestant who turned out to be a man of the underground Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC). His name was Mr. Zenoviy Markevych and he was from Komarno. He taught me how to pray the rosary and on the feast of St. Nicholas in 1987, he took me to Sambir to meet Father Mykolay Kuts. We arrived just as the Great Vespers with Lytia³⁷ were being celebrated. Everyone present was singing aloud and at the top of their voices as if there was no Soviet authority in the world. At the end, everyone kneeled and sang "God, listen to our pleas, calamity is destroying our land..." Tears instantly ran from my eyes because I am very emotional about such things and my soul cried out: "Lord, thank You for bringing me to this holy place. This is where the true Ukrainian Church is and it is with such people that one can go to the barricades!"

A small cabin served for many years as a workshop of priestly cadres for the underground Church. It was Father Mykolay Kuts who organized in Bylychi (the site of a miraculous spring), the first open Divine Liturgy on the occasion of the millennium of the Christianization of Ukraine followed by commemorations in Zarvanytsia, Drohobych, and Lviv. With his titanic work, this modest man contributed to the collapse of communism and the return of the Church from the underground. Today, nobody mentions his name with this being the place for truth. I used to think that Father Mykolay would become a bishop but the black envy of some "religious comrades" was a great blow to him. The

³⁵ According to one legend, the Most Holy Virgin came down from heaven to Pochaiv and left her footprint there on a stone. Many Christians say that they can see it there.

³⁶ To this day, the Pochaiv monastery is under the jurisdiction of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate.

³⁷ A special ritual during vespers with going around the church.

Pharisees did everything to crush the name of this godly priest but the Lord protected him during those persecutions.

In the second half of the 1980's, fortune began to smile in Ukraine's favour. Because of the horrible explosion at Chernobyl, the world came to realize that a Ukrainian nation existed in the Bolsheviks' penitentiary of nations. Exactly one year later to the day, there were reported sightings of the Holy Virgin in the village of Hrushiv near Drohobych. The Holy Spirit brought hundreds of thousands of people to the village's miraculous spring. The godless were leaping out of their skin while shouting: "there is no God and miracles do not happen!" But who would listen to them? Thousands of people from around the world were coming to this beautiful place, at night and during day, testifying their faith to God. The village was invaded by so many cars that it became impossible to cross from one side of the street to the other on foot. I drove there five times and went once on foot. With my own eyes, I witnessed miracles that had crippled children and people of all ages, who, despite the nasty weather, stand in mud to pray to God for a better destiny for Ukraine. Those were the people who begged for Mary's protection and initiated the Perestroika³⁸ movement!

In 1982, I had a dream that I was to find a flower that would bloom for 1000 years. This made me sad. Where could I find it? I climbed a very high mountain and saw green as well as silky grass that went as high up as my chest. I took two steps forward and there, saw grass that was laid out in the form of a circle. In the middle, I saw a beautiful white chamomile that bloomed for 1000 years. I picked it up. For a long time, I could not make sense of this dream and again the same man who taught me not to charge people for healing them said: "our Church will be celebrating its anniversary in 1988!" And in that year I became a practicing Christian. Furthermore, I became a member of the Ukrainian Helsinki Group. Those were the golden years in the fight for Ukrainian independence! I was dealing with national-religious propaganda. Even under communism, I already had three printing machines and good people doing good work. I was also fortunate enough to have a good photographer. I took some money from my modest salary and brought materials to those who needed them. This was my way of awakening people. Before perestroika, I managed to spend all of my money on good things.³⁹

I received the body and blood of Jesus Christ for the first time in my life at the age of twenty-two. I did not understand anything at first but shortly afterwards, I felt sweetness on my lips and in my soul as I desired more. A year later, I went to Communion for the second time. Each time after that, the intervals between Communions became shorter and shorter. The Lord was drawing me to Himself. Then I came to the realization that it's not worth living in this world if you do not have Communion everyday! The Divine Liturgy is life and everything that is beyond the Church is vanity. On three separate occasions people of great merit offered me high positions in Lviv. The lure was great but I prayed and the Lord freed me from this temptation. I did not want to exchange the Church, the harbinger of the silent God, for the vast world. It was more pleasant for me to pray silently in a corner than to make myself an ape in a high position.

Soon enough, Father Mykhailo Kuts took me to Bishop Fylymon Kurchaba (21/12/1913 – 26/10/1995) for the latter to find somewhere a place for me. The bishop gave me a stern look and asked: "what have you experienced?" I pondered over his question for a brief moment as I pictured him viewing me through an x-ray. I figured that I would have to confess to him about my dark past. Following the encounter, I came to the bishop almost every day and sometimes even at night. With him lived an old nun by the name of Andreyia Shelvika who cooked and always treated me well, never hesitating to give me food. Fylymon Kurchaba was a native of the village of Velykosilky, Kamyanko-Busky district, Lviv region. At the age of twelve, he was sent off to the monastery of the Order of the Most Holy Redeemer. He then studied in Belgium and was ordained a priest by Mykola Charnetsky. In 1939, he went on a mission to the village of Trostianets where Father Andriy Bandera worked as a pastor until he was shot dead by the communists in a prison, his only crime being a true priest. Bishop Fylymon was for forty years dean of a secret monastery where he lived until Ukraine proclaimed its independence. He was fluent in French and sometimes read to me aloud, simultaneously translating the

³⁸ Russian word meaning "restructuring." Glasnost (openness) and perestroika were promoted in the USSR by the state's last general party secretary and President Mikhail Gorbachev in the late 1980's.

³⁹ i.e. before inflation made this money worthless

text into Ukrainian for me. In one book he read that during the French Revolution, 50% of priests joined the commune, and 50% did not, all of them though, being unmarried. And in the UGCC after the Stalinist pogrom, 30% joined the commune and 70% did not, even though many of them had families with many children. Let he who has a brain ponder over this.

Bishop Fylymon lived in a house that went one metre deep into the ground. He was a true monk who knew a great deal about modesty. It was with his blessing that the underground priests courageously attacked the godless Bolshevik system. Not surprisingly, the glory of this victory was claimed by others. The bishop only smiled back at this. Although he had a stern look, a deep voice, and was rigorous with himself and others, he could still laugh with anyone. I could not understand how one can be a bishop and joke, but soon life taught me to laugh with tears. The biggest bravery for those times was revealed by the monks of the Order of the Most Holy Redeemer: Father Mykolay Kuts, Father Mykhailo Vynnytsky, Father Yevstakhiy Smal, Father Ivan Bilyk, Father Mykhailo Voloshyn; and the following married priests: Father Roman Kaspryshyn, a father of eleven children, Father Oleksiy Vaskiv, a father of five children, Father Bohdan Smuk, a father of five children, Father Yaroslav Lesiv, Father Kostiantyn Panas, and many others. It is impossible to mention them all. The Ukrainian priests were no less courageous when they left the jurisdiction of the Muscovite Church along with their parishes. The first one to do this was Father Mykhailo Nyskohuz of the village of Stara Sil, and the second, Father Yaroslav Chukhniy, who was from the church of the Transfiguration in Lviv. Although both of them had many children and had undergone severe persecutions, they bravely followed the voice of the Holy Truth.

I helped the bishop with various little tasks while preparing documents for the monastery and the Church. With God's help, we managed to save the cathedral from being turned into a cinema. With this in mind, I asked Bishop Fylymon to name the church after St. Josaphat – Ivan Kuntsevych (1580 – 1623), who was archbishop of Polotsk and Ukraine's greatest martyr, relics of whom rest at St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome. In a couple of years, I found out that nearby at 100, Zamarstynivska Street, there stood a chapel named in honour of St. Josaphat before the war where Father Artemiy Tsehelskiy once served. God's deeds are strange indeed!

Bishop Fylymon blessed the creation of a group of seminarians that was led by Stepan Meniok, now a bishop. I had the task of teaching boys the Church Slavonic language and sometimes the professor would ask me to conduct a class. I would explain to them the order of the liturgy, certain prayers, the ascetic life, and other things. Quite good priests came out of that group. I was myself studying and helping others, and I did not dare to think about becoming a priest because of my horrible sins. It tortured me very much because wherever I went, everyone was asking me: "when will you be ordained? Are you a priest?" And others even claimed to "have seen" how I was serving and wanted to know how much I was being paid for this... One elderly lady in the street came up to me and kissed me on the hand. I was pressed to the wall. I ran away to my friend in the Carpathians but there it was just the same. I came back. Bishop Fylymon was afraid to ordain me, for he did not know what to expect of me. One time, on the feast of the Presentation,⁴⁰ I was praying for the whole night by the grave of Bishop Charnetsky and if I undertook some business, than one of two things had to happen: either it had to be my way or I would die. This is why the bishop had some doubts himself. Aside from this, the whisperers were not sleeping either. I talked to Father Pavlo Dmukhovsky and he asked me about my past. He then said: "I thought that only my life was so difficult but I see that yours is not much different. You know, here some folks say that you are from the KGB⁴¹ and that you squeezed your way into the Church. I will pray that you become a priest." He gave me a Horologion.⁴²

Life is a strange thing. At school I was suspected of different things and at work there were rumours that I was from the KGB because I do not drink, do not smoke, play sports, and think too much all the time. And here, the same story repeated itself. Then I told someone straight in the eye that a slave can never understand a free person and that one can do things without seeking profit. With the coming of freedom, everything was changing: heroes fell into oblivion and the chameleons got the

⁴⁰ In Eastern Church, the feast of the Presentation of the Most Holy Mother of God and Ever Virgin Mary in the temple.

⁴¹ A horrible word in Soviet reality, the Committee for State Security.

⁴² In the Eastern Church, a book of prayers for each hour of the day.

trough. It was difficult for me to look at all this but the Lord has His plans for everything. The bishop took me to St. George's Hill,⁴³ to Patriarch Myroslav-Ivan Lubachivsky. I sat in the chapel and behind the door, my destiny was being decided. I almost felt like crying because I saw that they were bouncing me back and forth and I said to Jesus in the tabernacle: "should I just dash out from here right now and then never ever have anything to do with the clergy? I will be working as an ordinary locksmith and going to church like all ordinary people. You won't forsake me Jesus, right?" Then Father Nowakiwsky came out and said: "His Eminence said that you should come in humility in three days to take an examination." I was expecting something different and the words "in humility" frightened me.

I ran to the grave of Bishop Mykola Charnetsky. There I would always find solutions to my problems. First and foremost, it was there that I received the healing of my leg that was giving me great pain since my days in the army. Another time when it was tough, I fasted for one week and every day I would come to pray for our Church. As I was praying, a heavy thunderstorm lit the sky and rivers of water were flowing around me. I stood soaked to the skin, hardly breathing because my chest and hands had been paralyzed by my troubles. Suddenly, a candle lit in front of me. A little miracle! I even smiled, for now I was not alone, Jesus was with me. After that I heard the voice of Bishop Mykola: "go home, everything is going to be alright."

And so, one more time, I asked Bishop Charnetsky for protection: "you bishop, see me through, for you know that I should have been in hell long ago for all my sins. If I am to be a bad priest, then let me die right now and not survive to be ordained. And if it is God's will for me, a wretched person, to serve Him before the holy altar, than protect me, St. Mykola, and help me become a saint one day too, so that I could lead as many souls to heaven as possible and be able to ask for a better destiny for our unfortunate Ukraine."

I was in Komarno for a nine day silent spiritual retreat under the guidance of Father Bohdan Hirsk. It was there that I confessed the sins of my entire life. We prayed alone for fourteen hours a day. It was very difficult during the first three days and then I felt such grace from God that I forgot about my body and the world around me. I became light, transparent, and with wings.

One week before diaconal ordination, I felt frantic, my whole body was trembling, and my temperature was rising with every passing day. On the last day, I was simply burning and I saw fire before my eyes. It served me right for my sins and there was not going to be any ordination tomorrow! But I woke up in the morning and felt completely healthy. A miracle! Bishop Yulian Voronovsky ordained me deacon on October 9 and on the feast of the Protection,⁴⁴ on October 14, 1991, Patriarch Myroslav-Ivan ordained me a priest at St. George's Cathedral. I could not come to my senses: "Lord, what have you done to me! I am such a beast, I have sinned so much and You take me into Your hands and put me before Your altar!" "I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more." (Isaiah 43: 25).

And at this moment, I remembered Sister Teklia-Yevdokiya Levkovych from the Congregation of the Sister Servants of Mary Immaculate (11/11/1905 – 18/03/1997). Once, my parents were selling their small home in Rudno and were moving to Lviv. My mother made an agreement with Sister Teklia and set the price at 1500. One man heard about this and proposed 3000. Although my parents lived in poverty, my mother did not get tempted by big money and sold the house to the nun. Sister Teklia turned it into a well-known monastery where for thirty years, prayers were said and human souls saved. Rudno and all the adjoining villages were under the protection and guidance of this nun, small in height but great in spirit. Just like a bee collects honey for the hive, in the same way Sister Teklia gathered people for the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church and paved the way for the liberation of Ukraine. She could have gotten married and had ten or fifteen children. Nevertheless, at the age of twenty, she took a vow of chastity in the monastery and led to God's path thousands of people who called themselves her children. For years, she cracked the godless ice of Bolshevik atheism.

⁴³ The hill in the centre of Lviv where the central Greek Catholic Cathedral is and all the major offices of the UGCC used to be before Cardinal Lubomyr Husar moved his office to Kyiv in 2005.

⁴⁴ The feast of the Protection of the Most Holy Mother of God and the Eternal Virgin Mary. This feast commemorates the miraculous appearance in 911 A.D. of the Mother of God in the church of Blachernae in Constantinople and the deliverance of the people from attack through the Virgin's protection.

I saw this nun for the first time in 1967 and my parents said that I had to kiss her hand, and Sister Teklia embraced me and kissed my head. I remember her sweet voice and her face that would shine with love for God and Ukraine. We used to call her our granny. In 1988, I came to Sister Teklia with some church matters and she said to me: “I will never forget what your mother did for me. That’s why I kneel every day and say the “Hail Mary” and ask God to give you a fortunate destiny.” When I heard this, I felt spooked all over and my hair stood up. So this is why I am still alive despite the hundred times that death stared me straight in the eyes! I always felt some kind of strange protection above and said to myself that it was just fate. As it turned out, it was Sister Teklia’s prayers. She is the one who begged for the holy sacrament of priesthood for me!

Later on, Sister Teklia asked me to bury her when she would die. I only shrugged my shoulders because I hardly managed to travel once a year from Kaminets to Lviv. I did not want to leave my people alone. But life changed and I found myself in Lviv. The funeral took place in the company of a great number of people, clergy, and nuns. Sister was born in Horodok and this is where we buried her. She lived in the monastery for seventy-two years! After her death, I experienced two miraculous healings through her intercession. I also prayed for one man who had a high position in the corporate world and was suddenly on his deathbed. Interestingly, he is still alive today.

I also remember the words of Father Volodymyr Yurha from Komarno who told me: “millions of Ukrainians shed their blood, were tortured in prisons, suffered in Siberia, but still sacrificed themselves and prayed that God give Ukraine a better destiny and call upon future generations to continue in the struggle. These are the people to whom we should be grateful for the calling of priesthood, for our freedom, for the Church, and Ukraine. Their prayers from the afterlife are helping us.”

Kaminets⁴⁵

Bishop Fylymon informed me that there was no one among the priests who could be sent to Kaminets-Podilsky. As it turned out, one priest was ill, another could not come, and yet another did not want to give up his parish. On seeing such a difficult situation, I said to Jesus: “Lord, the thing that is more difficult – let it be mine.” And so I went to the bishop. The bishop said that for such a mission, one year of experience was an underlying minimum. In most likelihood however, it was the will of God that made him agree with my request. Two weeks after my ordination, I found myself in the centre of Kaminets and under a cross. It was precisely November 3, 1991. This cross stood in the place of an old Basilian cathedral and was implanted there not long ago by the courageous Bishop Pavlo Vasylyk. When night struck, I had a vision of Father Pavlo Dmukhovsky as he spread his iliton⁴⁶ on the altar as a means of letting me know that he was going to help me from that other world. The first Service was celebrated under an open sky with eight young people watching on to see what would happen. I also had to serve as a cantor for myself because no one present had the slightest idea of how to do it. Some time later we dragged a builders’ wagon⁴⁷ from Lviv. As I was conducting Service, I thought to myself: “where am I?” I have exchanged a beautiful and spacious church in Lviv for a shed. And in Lviv they told me: “just give Service and come back, for there is no place to live and there is no church there.” But I decided to live in the parish under any circumstances, for as the saying goes, “a stone gets covered with moss and I will get covered with people.” Let them know that a priest is with them and let them care about where he has to live and what he has to eat...

It was very difficult for me to go through all this chaos, but I had recollections of my days in the army and told myself that as long as nobody was kicking me with their boots, torturing me with hot iron, nor pursuing me by means of a wolf hound, I was going to survive. I was patient and three times a

⁴⁵ In an old map, the modern city of Kamyanets-Podilsky was referred to as Kaminets.

⁴⁶ A cloth that is put on the altar beneath the antimimension (another cloth with the relics of martyrs inside of it, which symbolizes that the first Christians had their service on the graves of martyrs) and serves as a covering for the antimimension.

⁴⁷ A wagon usually used by those who work on a construction site for rest, meals, and other daily necessities.

day, meditated to the book by St. Alphonsus⁴⁸ entitled “Prayer – A Strong Means for Salvation.” It helped me a great deal. I also prayed a lot, especially the Jesus prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” I would repeat these words every day for at least 500 times and sometimes even for 800 or 1000 times. I believed that prayer, along with a good sermon, were most effective in the quest for something great. And so, wherever I went, I grabbed souls for God!

Once on a Sunday, twenty people showed up for Service. How happy was I! Looking back, I am frightened to think that my beginnings in Kaminets were so modest. In a month’s time however, Bishop Fylymon came and brought me various priestly things, for he was well aware of what I would need in such a situation. I was surprised to see an elderly bishop of frail health travel so far to see me in winter. He was deeply worried about me and in two months time, would come to see me again.

I gathered people in a different house every time and in this way I came to know them on a more personal note. They were learning how to sing the liturgy and to pray the rosary. After a while, the “wagon” contained roughly seventy people – exclusively young people. At the same time, I was fighting to transfer to a safe location the historical archive from the ancient church that was given to our community on the feast of the Assumption on the condition that we would never lose it or give it away. Nevertheless, we all fasted in friendship and prayed on Fridays for this intention. One Bolshevik was beginning to create huge obstacles for us, but with God’s help, we managed to move out ninety truckloads of archive materials. All that was left was a wooden scaffold leading up to the very ceiling. Nobody believed us that one week before Easter, we would have the situation under control and the archive dismantled completely.

I preached an enticing sermon the following Sunday by saying: “I will not bless baskets in this ‘wagon.’ We all have to work this week inside the church and I start working tomorrow too.” In the meantime, I prayed and asked Saint Josaphat the Martyr to help us deal with all this, promising to name the church in his honour. The next day a miracle happened! By the end of the day we had dismantled the scaffold completely. We worked in the temple everyday until 2 am – and on Easter 1992, we held our first Divine Liturgy with 250 people in attendance. It was a great grace from God!

Three days before Easter, my mother called me and said that our grandpa was dying. She frantically said to me: “please come!” My head was spinning. “What should I do? The church was not ready yet.” I decided not to go, because this would mean that the people would not have their feast day, while I would serve a separate liturgy for my grandpa and would attend to him after his death. But grandpa said: “I will not die until he comes and confesses me.” And so it happened. I became available only one week after Easter. I celebrated liturgy, heard grandpa’s confession, and gave him Communion. Everybody was asking me to stay for the funeral because it was obvious that he was going to die and I felt I had to return to Kaminets, to my people who were without a priest. I had hardly arrived when a woman who was already waiting, approached me. She said to me: “my brother-in-law is dying from cancer and I am asking you to confess him.” He was thirty-six and I used to urge him to go to confession at least once in his lifetime. He did not say anything in reply, but before his death, he remembered me and finished his life in God’s grace. And my grandpa passed away in peace after living for eighty-two years. During the last two years of his life on earth, he had already become incredibly weak but managed to pray the Stations of the Cross five times a day. There came a time when he had learnt everything by heart.

Bishop Fylymon came in November 1992 to bless the church and to name it after the martyr St. Josaphat. It was a very festive event and many guests arrived to partake in it. One lady who was serving food to the bishop at the table constantly repeated herself by saying: “our Father is so fine, so fine.” And the bishop responded by saying: “if he is so fine, be careful not to eat him up.” And he had sounded an early warning signal. Four years later, that same lady began doing horrible things against me because I was firmly defending one seriously ill nun.

During the first three years of my time in Kaminets, I lived in five different apartments and would not wish this upon anyone. Nevertheless, I had to bear this because I had one goal – to finish what I had started. Once they found an apartment for me. Everything was fine but in one month, a

⁴⁸ Alphonsus Maria de Liguori (1696-1787), Italian prelate and saint. He founded the Redemptorist Order in 1732. His feast day is celebrated on August 2nd.

stoned doctor came to me one evening and said: “this is my house and you must disappear by tomorrow morning.” And here the “old man” woke up in me. This “mishap,” all one metre and sixty centimetres of him, was standing before me, swaying and threatening me. One punch and no surgeon no matter how talented would ever be able to glue him back together again! All my life I used to solve such problems in six seconds with nothing else but my fists. But I was a priest now and I no longer had the right to do this. I fell down on my knees and did what Jesus would do: three times I prayed for the owner of this apartment with my hands raised. I said the “Our Father” and the “Hail Mary.” It was an unbelievable sacrifice for me and then, suddenly, I felt how the heavens opened as I felt an incredible sweetness in my soul. I wanted this wonderful state to last forever... This was a big lesson for my future.

After that I went to the live in the sacristy, where the temperature did not differ much from the one outside: -14 degrees Celsius. I slept there for one night and miraculously woke up alive. I covered my face with a towel and breathed in this way. After that I moved into a decent apartment, one which housed families with many children. As I came from the church, children would see me and run to me. They climbed all over me, and people laughed – nothing short of hilarity. And this was all rather odd, because my appearance is quite gangster-like and my beard is thick and black. Some time ago, I brought some interesting books to the church for a priest who even thought that I was a prisoner, and here the children... Once as I was walking along the street, a mother and a little boy approached me. Then suddenly and for no reason, the child turned to me and smiled at me. Strange! How can one explain this? In general, small children have never hesitated to approach me. I see every child as being a little Jesus. When I look at these little angels, I always tell myself that I have to give up my life for the sake of their happiness. Besides, I’ve got a “birdy” in my armpit and it can sing wonderfully. Children immediately go to my hand to look for the bird. And even the parents often ask me what I give it to eat. I say: “borshch, potatoes, sausages, and anything else that is at hand...”⁴⁹

The church of St. Josaphat teemed with children, even the little ones who came in their diapers. The little ones were standing calmly in front, in order to see everything well. Some could slowly crawl on four legs to the sanctuary, “for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” (Matthew 19: 14). Only children stood under the Gospel: such was the order. I got fed by their spirit. Children are our future and we live for them. Once I dreamt of being married and having twelve kids. Although I loved the idea, my life went a different way – towards God and Ukraine. Yet, I do not regret anything, because I always ask parents to give birth to children and during the time of my priesthood, a lot of children have been born, perhaps more than 120. Metropolitan Andrey wrote that in every family there must be no less than three children. If this happens than the nation will not perish. And so I convince and encourage. It is all about presenting the idea and then you walk along the street and hear some mother and father cry from afar to you: “Father, thank you for the child!” I hope that on Judgment Day these children will protect me before God and will say: “Jesus, forgive him his sins because thanks to him, we were born into this world.”

Once I found out that one woman was interested in having an abortion. I met her, spoke with her, tore up the receipt from the already paid surgery, and convinced her to give birth. We agreed. She gave birth to a boy weighing five kilograms. And not long ago I was traveling to Kaminets on a small bus. A woman got on with her son, saw me, and said: “Bohdanchyk, if not for this Father, you would not be alive in this world, all of this because I wanted to have an abortion.” The boy was already grown-up; he looked at me and blinked.

Being a priest is great joy, but there are also times when you have to suffer. After the arrival of Bishop Fylymon, I was given two nuns to catechize the children at school. The older one was always traveling, and the younger one had God’s grace to work with children. She worked with the whole school – from the primary classes to the senior classes. She was even invited to a teachers’ seminar in Kaminets and everyone was thrilled by her presence. Children started coming to church in whole classes, together with their teachers and parents. I twice requested twice that the older nun not leave the

⁴⁹ When translating this book into English, I did not have a clue about the meaning of the word “bird.” When walking with my daughter one day, Father Ihor demonstrated the trick to us: he put his right hand under the jacket into the left armpit and brilliantly imitated a bird’s singing. It really looked like the sound was coming from under the jacket.

younger nun alone because I worried when she walked alone around the city. I also said that she was working too much. Then the two of them went to Lviv for Christmas holidays, and one day the younger one said: "Father, they will not allow me to come back." I went numb, my chest and hands went cold; I was short of breath and did not know what was happening to me. The children came to school and the nuns were not there. What should I tell them? Teachers and parents called Lviv, but their pleas fell on deaf ears. The children and teachers at school collected signatures in a petition.⁵⁰ I went to Lviv to visit one "religious friend" who told me slyly: "if only this particular Sister is requested than we shall not send her there." I became numb from hearing such rubbish and I could not make sense of anything.

Things became clearer in only half a year. I met my friend, a fellow priest who said: "Ihor, do not be offended because I have been worrying about you, but please tell me if it is true that you were caught with one of the horrible sins? The dean said this at the meeting." At this point, I realized that the older nun together with one "queen of spades," who was discouraging people from saying the truth during confession for sins that violated the sixth commandment, were spreading "black dirt" against me just to see me leave Kaminets. In all my life I have not seen a crime more horrible than that. More than 800 children and their families got a horrible stab in their backs. Who will heal their spiritual wounds and how? What destiny awaits them? I did not know where to hide my eyes before the people, not knowing that there might be a place for gossiping and such dark things in the Church.

"Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh." (Philippians 3: 2).

After that, two girls arrived in Lviv for catechism classes. Their names were Mariya Kosarchyn and Nelia Hroubova. In 1994, we were successful in getting from the municipal authorities a wonderful house that would serve as a classroom for our children. Many people were coming to the church of St. Josaphat and every Sunday approximately 100 people received Communion. On major feast days, this number went up to more than 200. Very often, children would bring their parents for confession or a church wedding. I memorized almost all the works of Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky and applied his tactics in seizing human souls. The practice of missionary work of the martyr Vasyl Velychkovsky who had served in Kaminets in 1941 was also of great help to me. I had a clear goal before me: the Patriarchate of the Ukrainian Church, one rite, and one language. This was the correct formula for a strong nation. And he who makes any contrary steps is working for some foreign special services in order to avoid the unity of our Church and nation. Some suggest praying only in Russian, others in Polish, and the third category might even use Chinese just to remain a sect. It is so horrible to see the Ukrainian nation divided and destroyed because of religion. These are treacherous people who call themselves believers but in fact, they hate our people and the Ukrainian Church.

"If anyone says, 'I love God' but hates his brother, he is a liar and a pretender. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen." (1 John 4: 20).

After that, I had a distinct dream about the Church through which I received the confirmation of my thoughts.

My Dear Yoke

After becoming a priest at the age of thirty-three, I studied the situation very well and therefore, I firmly decided to go against this world. "To go forward against the wind, against waves, and to toss courageously up until one's death is to carry the heavy cross" (Ivan Franko). I was trying to do my best in fulfilling my duties: to serve Divine Liturgy as if it were for the last time in my life, to preach a sermon so that people would never forget it, to hear confessions in such a way that relief and peace would come to those in search of it, to baptize and celebrate weddings so that they would be remembered for one's entire life; to bury the dead so that the whole family would start going to church

⁵⁰ i.e. signed a petition with a request to send the nun back.

after that. And everything should be done with selfless love, remembering that you serve God and stand before Him.

I knew that people are observant of a priest's dress code and therefore, I never allowed myself to wear expensive clothes or shoes. I have always been a firm believer of voluntary poverty and simplicity. Once a poor homeless man came to me and said: "I know you, you've got no car." I later buried his old mother, a decent Russian woman. She fell down, broke her hip, and had to stay in bed for a long time. Sometimes mice would gnaw at her body for her drunkard son would not be able to look after her. It was a great honour for me to bury such a poor person. I also had to carry the casket because there was nobody else who could do it.

An unforgettable funeral was that of Vasyl Shyrko, a nationally-conscious Ukrainian who did a great deal for Kaminets-Podilsky. He died on the feast of the Protection in 1996 at the age of fifty-one. The whole city gathered for his funeral and it was his passing that caused the triumph of Christianity in the souls of many people. The same can be said about the funeral of Miss Larisa Sozanska who died that very same year on the feast of the Nativity of Our Lady at the age of forty-five. She courageously battled with a grave illness and passed to eternity with a smile on her face. I regularly gave Communion to these people and supported them as much as I could until their last minute. I am overjoyed that their souls went to heaven.

Very often I came across such horrors as fees in church and would see how a funeral would take place without a priest. Others had no way of being baptized, having a church wedding, and going to confession simply because they had to pay and could not afford it. In my opinion, the desire of making money deprives people of common sense. Therefore, conscientiously fulfilling my duties, I did not take money for these sacraments at all. This shocked people and they did not know how to react. I would respond by saying that I serve not for money but for souls. This gave me the right to speak the truth in the eyes of the false world and to feel free. People came to church in large numbers, attending Services, making substantial donations without the slightest thought of even checking or making announcements about who gave money and in what amount. We did not go to the depths of such shame. I served people and people trusted me. It was a golden community, for we lived like one big family. Strangers became dear to each other. During Lent every week, we dedicated a Service that would focus on a different part of the Stations of the Cross. One of them was celebrated in Russian, since one third of the parishioners were Russian. I did all I could to make these people feel like full-fledged children of God in our church. And when I asked everyone to wear embroidered shirts on the feast of the Descent of the Holy Spirit, the Russian-speaking people also came wearing wonderfully embroidered shirts representing the Podillia region of Ukraine. Those were the best and most golden years of my life!

On the anniversary of Stepan Bandera's death, on November 15, 1993, we installed a monumental metal cross with a trident and thorn wreath in memory of the sixtieth anniversary of the artificial famine in Ukraine. Then the community of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyivan Patriarchate (UOC-KP) also came along with their priest and together we blessed the memorial cross. Some time before, the community along with their priest helped us transport the archive from our church. One can never forget such things. On the feast of Sts. Peter and Paul, I would always go to them and on the feast of St. Josaphat, they would come to us.

Once while I was in town, I helped an older lady carry a bag of groceries and found out that both of her children were already fifty but had not yet been baptized. I visited them regularly for one year, asking, pleading, knocking, but their door would always close before me. They would even write notes asking me not to come any more because I was from the "wrong" church. But a miracle from God happened and I eventually baptized both children and confessed their mother. Her son, Kyrylo Ambroshchuk, turned out to be a talented artist who painted the iconostasis in our church.

I also wed Volodymyr Kupetski, who had painted in our church an impressive icon of St. Josaphat behind the altar. Then Volodymyr Matviytsiv painted consummate portraits of the Blessed Mykola Charnetsky and Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky.

At that time, I lived in the apartment of a Jewish family. The lady of the house told me the story of how she ended up in hospital a long time ago. Her nine-month old son was already dying; his entire body had blackened. Her roommate advised her to baptize the infant before death. There was a church

not far away and they quickly hurried in that direction. Before they brought the child back to the hospital, the boy was completely healthy.

In 1993, Viktor Pechenoha came to church and could hardly move his legs. He was twenty-four at the time, a married man and a father of two. The doctors said that both of his legs had to be amputated. I confessed Viktor, celebrated a sacramental marriage for him and his wife, gave him extreme unction, and him and his wife promised that if he got better, they would give birth to a third child. A miracle happened – Viktor was cured and the population of Ukraine increased!

And this is what Miss Natalia Andronnyk wrote: “on Christmas Eve 1993, I saw a star from the window in the shape of a cross. I even left the church to have a closer look at it. At the very same Service, I saw a crucifix in the air to the right of the priest. Jesus was white in a black nimbus. When the priest started to pronounce: ‘take, eat, this is my body...,’ Christ slowly came down from the cross into the chalice, placing His hands on His chest. This vision repeated itself during all the Services until Palm Sunday.

“And on January 5, 1994, I saw on the wall three white crosses in a dark nimbus. When we started singing the creed, I saw crosses over the icons of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker, Mykola Charnetsky, St. Josaphat, and the Holy Trinity. Later, one big cross appeared over the Virgin Mary with the little Jesus who was smiling. The baby was a newborn, and when the priest again started saying ‘take, eat... – the child slowly moved from his mother’s hands into the chalice.’”

I would always tell my dear ones: “go to church and God will help you.” Quite often, miraculous healings took place: a good confession and Communion. I was never too lazy to do anointment. Various mild and severe illnesses disappeared from people. All this only strengthened the faith in the hearts of young Christians, for there were practically no older people. The floor in the church was washed by young girls who in this way were asking God to give them good husbands and a fair destiny. Soon afterwards, Germans began arriving with humanitarian aid. As for me, I would first clothe the terminally ill, families with many children, the poor, and all others at random, including the homeless who had helped me with various small repairs by the parish house. Some genuine gypsies would also come to the church to throw money into the wafer box. The gypsy camp was ruled by the respectful Yurko who hailed from Rakhiv and whose nickname was “chauffeur.” He was a wonderful man – we got along quite well and I later baptized his grandson.

Once I gave my sweater to a man who occasionally got drunk. Then I noticed that he was not wearing it. So I inquired further. He replied: “Mr. Father, I do not wear it, for I am afraid that I may stop drinking...”

Miss Vira Zhuk organized a nice religious concert which was broadcasted on Khmelnytsky Television four times. It was an immense success. This should not come as a great surprise since real human nightingales were singing: Halyna Levkovska, Bohdan Polevy, Valia Poluektova-Shcherbatiuk, Kateryna Lavrusevych, and others. I would constantly buy the best Ukrainian prayer-books such as “Let’s come and worship” and would give them out to those who were joining our big Christian family. And as a result, the whole church, both children and adults, were in a lovely and animated manner singing for the whole duration of the Divine Liturgy as well as during prayers or the parastas,⁵¹ holding before their eyes blue prayer-books.

Easter always marked a certain high point. Services would commence at midnight with the faithful continuing to pray until the early hours of the morning. Everybody came, even couples with newborn babies in carriages. I always stated that the church is our home and an apartment a temporary hostel. Those Easter celebrations were unforgettable. We would go for hayivky⁵² en masse, to concerts and other events, and would always welcome the New Year communally.

Since 1985, I stopped celebrating the New Year according to the pagan calendar. On this night, the whole world is full of sin: drinking, lechery, and fighting. As a result, five minutes before midnight on that night every year, I fall on my knees with my hands up and start pronouncing twelve times the fiftieth Psalm as penance for each month of the past year. Then I pray the rosary, make one full bow for each year of my life, and meditate. We did the same thing with the congregation until morning. It’s an

⁵¹ A special service for the souls of the deceased.

⁵² Ukrainian Easter dances.

unbelievable feeling: to pray that night with God and to begin the New Year as a community. In 1994, I received the following letter of greeting from Patriarch Myroslav-Ivan.

“Christ is born! Glorify Him!”

“Most Reverend Father Ihor. From the bottom of my heart, I express my gratitude for your kind letter, for the greeting, and some good news about your work in Kaminets. I am truly satisfied with your work and I hope that you will continue working for the good of the souls that you have been entrusted with, for our Ukrainian Martyr-Church, and our still miserable nation. Continue working like this and the good Lord will find His way to pay you back for your devoted work for the Church and the people. I understand that the work is hard, but it is also worth it when one can see that people absorb everything that you are giving them for the sake of their goodness, i.e. all your teachings and good examples which, as they see it, will try to be followed.

Your nuns were around again and they received further aid for paying off the debt that has dragged on while buying furniture for the house where they live. Watch them and preach to them and encourage them to do more work for our Ukrainian children by the church, for as you probably know, children are our future and the future of our nation! The better we raise them, the more faithful they will become, and then they will be good members of our Church and our nation.

“May the little newborn Jesus Christ, the Son of the Eternal God and Father, bless you in your work and help you with His grace at all times!”

I loved Kaminets and its people so much that Podillia became a second homeland for me. Kaminets is a pearl of world culture. Enormous canyons surround the old city. On the west side of the city is a bridge that was constructed in the fourth century, uniting the city with an old fortress. One may look and not believe his/her eyes; it is as if traveling a thousand years back in history. The entire city is surrounded by lush green forests. It is clean and looked after. And nearby is the Dniester river, mighty and deep as if it were a sea. Backota is especially beautiful and it is here that one can find remnants of an old monastery and a large river running fifty metres deep, hidden between the cliffs like a big chalice. Nothing but paradise on earth! My benefactors, Volodymyr and Natalia Shkvarski, have a country home there with hives of buzzing bees. I have been fortunate enough to visit them there from time to time. Podillia is the most beautiful land on earth with kind, wonderful, hardworking, talented, and honest people – only without a good fate like the rest of Ukraine. One’s heart bleeds when seeing how gardens bloom in this world while people are dying. My only joy is that until the end of the world, no occupier will ever manage to destroy us.

“Things won’t always be like this.” I made this inscription in the blacksmith’s house and attached it above the church entrance. Some people did not know how to say thank you for it, especially those whose souls were overburdened with grief. Others became angry because they did not want any change in their well-off lives. The inscription surprised everyone, for it was not customary and practically became a trap for souls. Many people came into the church just to ask about its significance. Once, when times were tough, I made myself repeat at every occasion: “things won’t always be like this.” I stumbled, dark thoughts entered my head, but I continued repeating this saying over and over again. This is what saved me and enriched me with hope.

Another inscription on the church read: “Ukrainian Orthodox Catholic Church of the Martyr St. Josaphat.” It also attracted people to the church, for it taught them unity and love. I once preached a sermon on the history of the Church and lost track of the time before I noticed that I had been talking for forty minutes. I thought about holding back my horses, for what would people think. After the liturgy, people came up to me and said: “Father, why did you stop speaking? It was so interesting.” In general, every Service, especially on Sundays, was a feast day. People could no longer fit in the big church.

Then we started building a church in a small area at the other end of the city. It took a lot of effort to earn a nice spot. Of course, I was doing all this with the bishop’s blessing and he and I agreed on the name of the new church. Some distinguished people traveled to Lviv on this matter, but they were simply refused. One “religious lady” said: “in other cities there’s not a single church and you

already want a second one.” What a crime! – This became a kind of green light for us and we began construction. But the enemies of the church did not like that and complaints started pouring in from Lviv. An article appeared in the press. It was written by the so-called “comsomol man” and signed by the “queen of spades.”⁵³ It was much ado about nothing. A commission of important persons rushed to see what was happening, but the basement was already being tiled. Too late... With God’s grace, in two years time, we built the beautiful church of the Mother of God of Pochaiv. Young people rejoiced that at such a young age, they had taken part in the building of a church for future generations. Of course, I could have bought a car for this money and I would have had no problems, but my conscience told me to do otherwise – life is given to us only once and one has to hurry to do good while the sun is still shining.

In 1995, I saw in my dreams Bishop Mykola Charnetsky. He was sitting on the edge of his grave with his kind eyes and big gray beard. He said that he would help me. I came up, kissed his hand, and asked if I would be saved. The bishop smiled and said: “you do not need to know. You do your work.”

During the construction period, my tactics were justified, for whoever I asked, everybody was helping me sincerely and saying: “this is the priest that does not take money.” From the very beginning, our mission was faced with its fair share of obstacles and problems. At that time, a group of Russian-speaking architects was providing me with assistance and doing so I must add, free of charge. Directors of factories, banks, collective farms, building organizations, city councilors, all were ready to lend a helping hand. May the Lord reward them for this a hundredfold. Even Protestants from Germany were helping me, saying: “you know well what difference lies between our religions but we look at your life and are therefore helping you.”

Once I traveled to a village to fetch a man for a construction job when old ladies suddenly started asking me to give them shoes for their younger son who had nothing to wear. I took off my shoes and left them in their house. The poor folks were in utter shock. This occurred on a Tuesday at 10 am. Exactly at the same time on that same day, my mother in Lviv was seeing off some girls from catechism courses to the Stryiska bus station. While praying, her rosary fell down behind the radiator. My mother started to scrape out everything that was there and in the process found a \$100 bill. She immediately gave it to the girls from Kaminets for the construction of the church.

The Most Precious Treasure

In addition to all of this, I was also receiving invisible spiritual help: the prayers of those who were seriously ill and of whom I had been taking care of for quite a while by that point in time. They used to say that they were attaching a prayer to each brick they saw around them and I really sensed this help. Sister Tetiana Danchylo was with me. She worked very well with the terminally ill and her assistant was a girl by the name of Tania Bodnarchuk. To them, the most important thing was to help people in difficult times and to let them feel that they are needed by someone. It is also important to confess and to give Communion, to pay for someone’s surgery or to buy medicine, to make sure they can listen to the Divine Liturgy on the radio at 9:15 in the morning, and to teach them to pray the rosary, to bring an interesting book or to pay for the maintenance of their apartment; to buy a sewing or washing machine, a baby carriage, a TV set, a computer, a heater, etc. Just as there is an ambulance available at all times, in the same way a priest should always be ready to help people. With a little bit of work, the seriously ill become believers with an adamant faith, strong in spirit, and later, models for others. What happiness it is to be for them their hands, legs, and eyes. It is the biggest honour for a human being!

Iryna and Taras Hrytsak, Father Oleksander Mykhailychenko, Volodymyr Pavliv, Vasyl Hrinevych, Pavlo Kurylo, Oksana Hurska, Volodymyr and Anatolii Hlushko, Ihor Sosna, Natalia Solonko, Ihor Bohush, Lesia Heron, Liudmyla Zaderey, Volodymyr Douda, Andriy Kohut, Lesia Fleysher, Anatolii Klymyshyn, Stanislav Kreminsky, Maryanka Fedas, Iryna Moseliani, Valentyna

⁵³ The author is probably referring to some unpleasant people, nicknaming them with pejorative words.

Sikora, Liudmyla Sekridova, Oksana Hrytskova, Volodymyr Veres, and many others. Here is my most precious treasure, and I want to be with them in heaven.

Aside from us, the full-bellied and healthy, there are thousands of hungry, blind, paralyzed, and crippled people. It is a crime not to see and hear them. The main thing is to let them feel that they are the ones who are closest to God and equal in God's heart. These nice people are God's treasure, and what incredible happiness it is to be beside them, to love them and serve them. I celebrated the beginning of the third millennium in a hospital with a dying girl named Lesia Heron. There were five more people in the ward who could not go home because of their illnesses, and so we were praying from eleven in the evening until one in the morning. I saw tears of joy in their eyes, and they said that never before in their lives had they been as happy as they were during this New Year's celebration! It was a peak of happiness for me too.

Volodymyr Douba, born in 1956, has been ill with muscular dystrophy for eighteen years already. It was difficult for him to come to terms with this suffering because he was previously really into sports. After he started reading the Bible, peace came and his faith grew deeper. Today, Volodymyr says: "let's rejoice in whatever destiny God sends us, for the Lord will compensate us for our suffering on earth with eternal happiness in heaven."

In 1980, Taras Hrytsak broke his spine. Since that time, he has to lie on his stomach. He once said to me: "Father, I do not complain about being paralyzed, for if I continued to live like I used to live long ago, who knows where my soul would be now – maybe in hell. I am grateful to God for the cross I have to carry, because today I feel happy. I believe and have hope that I will go to heaven."

His wife Iryna, born in 1963, has had paralyzed legs and arms since childhood but still managed to graduate from Lviv University and teaches English. She manages to earn a living, and even pulls others to heaven with her. She has strong faith and knows the Holy Scriptures very well. Once, when she was sitting in a park in her wheelchair, a man came up to her and said: "poor little thing, how I pity you!" And Iryna replied: "I have a wonderful job, a husband, a roof above my head, I do not lack anything, and I believe in God and feel happy. You better ask those who walk and have hands, and you will hear how difficult it is for them to live and how unhappy they are..."

Liudmyla Zaderey, born in 1972, fell ill with diabetes at the age of fifteen. It's been a couple of years already since she went completely blind. Four times a day, she must take injections. She has an exceptional grace for prayer from God and pulls others to church. She does not complain about her condition and says that through her disease she found true friends in life, feels happy, and jokes with everyone. If she were to choose between health and God's grace, she says that she would choose the latter!

We've now got a whole aid network. The paralyzed read books to the blind, we pray for each other, and together we solve various problems. "Every human benevolence requires blessing from heaven. Let's hope also for its continuation after death." (Patriarch Myroslav-Ivan Cardinal Lubachivsky).

In Kaminets, drug addicts would often come to me. I even served a separate Divine Liturgy for them. The main thing is to avoid having the barrier of pride separating the people from the priest. One has to become everything for everyone. In my confessional, I had piles of books, rosaries, and little icons. I gave something to everyone in their need. On the two tables in the church, there was the most current and interesting information, and since there were usually a lot of people standing in line for confession, the rest were kept busy reading. Metropolitan Sheptytsky taught in his works that a pastor must always provide his sheep with spiritual food. And that's why I did everything to make sure that each Christian family had a small library and that people knew about the lives of the saints and the history of the Church and Ukraine. Four boys from my parish in Kaminets became priests.

After six years of work in 1994 and with God's help, I managed to publish a little book entitled: "Our Ukrainian Mykola the Wonderworker."⁵⁴ Unfortunately, it turned out that this book was of need to no one. It was a shock for me, and I wanted to burn the materials, but Sister Tetiana said: "wait a bit, do not hurry." Finally, Bishop Volodymyr Sterniuk silently blessed this little book and we started giving it out to people and asking them to read it, thinking that it might be of use to someone. Such was

⁵⁴ Referring to Bishop Mykola Charnetsky.

the sad beginning of this book and how it all ended, everybody knows. Thousands of people got healed on the grave of Bishop Mykola Charnetsky, and Pope John Paul II beatified him in 2001. In 1995, a booklet entitled “How To Reply To the Sects” was published. I was constantly writing various articles for newspapers as well as Christmas and Easter greetings. I was doing everything to embrace my people in God and our Church.

Endurance Tests

I continuously fought with the godless and eventually, got stabbed in the back by one of my own Pharisees. It never occurred to me that someone among the clergymen was watching my every step, saying various dirty things about me, and being restless as a result of my achievements. This is where black jealousy may lead. The “queen of spades” and the “comsomol man” were continuing their business, for they were saying that a lot of mud had to appear in print before some of it would actually stick. The old residents of Kaminets were telling me that when these “comrades” are in church, something bad will inevitably occur. More than once I saw animals’ bowels lying by my house or by the church entrance. On a few occasions, my door was smeared in blood. I sprinkled holy water on all of this, praying and sacrificing my sufferings to the souls in purgatory and giving myself up to God’s will. Furthermore, from time to time, I would receive letters in verse that when decoded, meant different dirty things. I also had to deal with threats over the phone. Not surprisingly, there was in me the desire to “strike a note” for I knew whose work this was. At the same time, I was asking Christ to give me the courage and patience to follow in His footsteps, to suffer with Him, and to be crucified with Him in order to be resurrected with Him.

My first conflict arose with a priest whom I had asked to help me in 1993. I had made all of the arrangements for him: a nice house with a garage, food, and nice people so that he would not go through what I went through once. But I saw that he was treating me like a dog. He finally cried out one day and said: “why did you bring me here? I had different plans.” He started telling people that the Metropolitanate had the worst opinion about me. In one month, half the parishioners left the church. And so I had to part with him and this was exactly what he wanted. Thus, when he left, he was already brainwashed enough to go on brainwashing others against me.

I could not believe that such things could happen in the Church. It was a shock for me! I did not see another way out but to cling close to the cross and pray: “Lord, bring to me the suffering of the present day so that here, on earth, I will atone for all my horrible sins and crimes, fulfill Your holy will, and bring to You as many souls as possible. Turn my life into a purgatory so that I will become a saint, and get to heaven after death. God! Injure my heart with Your grace, crucify me with your mercy, and let me die out of love to You. Amen.”

Ever since, I pray this prayer on a daily basis and it helps me a lot during critical moments of my life. Moreover, I started celebrating Divine Liturgy once a week for the souls in purgatory and for the forgiveness of my sins, the sins of our Church and people, for all my dear sick people, people of good will, and those willing to donate in various ways, for relatives, the imprisoned, enemies, sinners, and those who asked for my help in prayer. In only ten years, over 500 liturgies were served.

In 1996, a priest who was much younger than me came to Kaminets. After Divine Liturgy, I wanted to introduce him to the community. And then I suddenly heard him say in a raised voice: “no, you do not need to, I will introduce myself by myself!” People looked at each other and understood that conflict was looming once again. From that point, both the community and I were faced with dark days. First of all, they took away the inscription that read: “things won’t always be like this.” News of this reached all of Kaminets. People made a copy of it and wrote another one on the wall. Hostilities erupted shortly thereafter. What I had been gathering for five years had disappeared in five weeks. The poor folks became convinced that no priest was as horrible as Father Ihor and that he was practicing witchcraft while turning everyone around him into zombies, thus making a “tsar” out of himself.

Jealousy of God’s grace in one’s neighbour deprived the poor folks of their common sense, making them think that the entire community was just waiting for the right moment to crucify Tsar. And yet, it happened oppositely. The people hung a lock on the door of the church and in this way,

expressed their discontent against the blackmailing of the priest who had brought them closer to God and taught them how to love. At the same time, “religious comrades” had their *inomarkas*⁵⁵ stolen. They submitted a report to the police and suspected me and some other parishioners of this. Even the police could not put up with such folly. As Saint John the Chrysostom once said, “envy is a horrible passion. If it occupies somebody’s soul, it will not forsake it until it leads it to the edge of absurdity.” The whole city was petrified by such savagery. The most respectful people were writing to various Church institutions in Kyiv and Lviv, but all in vain. The “religious brotherhood” was stomping on human souls with a dirty boot as if it were pavement.

I then had a conversation with several Pharisees and I could feel that they were pushing me to leave the Church. This would make them very happy. It was another shock for me! They based all of their arguments on the black gossip of the “queen of spades” and the “comsomol man” who had been crying out for a long time already that I was making a “tsar” out of myself. How filthy was it to hear such things come from the mouths of religious people!

I calmly left behind two churches and a huge house. The new priests only had to wait until I left for Kyiv before they could carry on with their affairs. The black envy which they had been sowing for years against me had quickly deprived them of common wisdom. As soon as they would hear something good about me from the people, a pretense would immediately fall and the poor people’s faces would even change. The purpose of all this was to morally kill me with lies, villainy, blackening, and to lead me to a heart attack so that nobody would put me in prison. Everything would look innocent and no traces would be left behind. As Saint Ephrem once said: “he who has been pierced with envy and competition is worth only pity, for he has become the devil’s collaborator. His heart is always weak out of sadness, his look is pale, and his energies leave him. Envy and competition combine to make a horrible poison, out of which comes slander, hatred, murders.”

The time had come. I packed all of my belongings and Mr. Leonid Sviatokha drove me to Kyiv. A priest met me there and said: “Father, in the apartment where you were supposed to live, the drunken proprietor broke the door last night. You are more than welcome to get settled in the basement of the bell-tower.” As a result, I began living in a cold dark room with no window, eating biscuits with mineral water, waiting for what lay ahead. I came to the realization that I had been cleverly tricked. Nobody needed me here. The people from Kaminets found out where I was and came to get me. I returned. Time passed as the devil was becoming more and more malicious. Some people could not take it anymore and began to hesitate. One woman came up to me and said: “Father, one priest told me that you have stolen 100,000 dollars from the Metropolitanate and that your ordination is not valid.” I tried to speak with her but saw that she was blinded. And some would openly say: “at last we will be able to distribute the humanitarian aid by ourselves.” This was said by those who will never be satisfied even with half the world, claiming that I would not let them flourish at the cost of the Church. How awful was it to look at people who had been kissing your hand a day before, saying pleasant things about you, and then screaming by the command of the Pharisees: “crucify him!” “At times, it is the one who teaches that shall be subjected to ignominy and he shall suffer for those who had been learning from him spiritually.” (Blessed John Karpathosky).

It is very difficult to experience betrayal and for a long time I could not understand why people were treating me in such a way. Then a thought came to me and I wondered: “how many times have you betrayed Jesus with your heavy sins? Now suffer and repent. And if you want to be Jesus Christ’s disciple, remember that Judas sold him for thirty silver coins.” It was a dark hour for me in my life – the devil was taking revenge on me for everything that I had succeeded in doing for the Church and for Ukraine. Only God’s grace and the prayers of good people were keeping me in this world. I was also praying and sacrificing my sufferings for the souls in purgatory, as well as for the conversion of sinners. “For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for Him.” (Philippians 1: 29).

And suddenly in this darkness, a ray of light appeared. My friend Mykola Kostrytsky came to me and said: “Ihor, I believe in God, in the Last Judgment, and I recognize the existence of hell and heaven. Baptize me.” The one who was brought up in a completely different manner than I was,

⁵⁵ A car that is manufactured and imported from abroad.

someone who used to rule over a gang, and someone who went with me through the Zabaikal hell and served time in the world's most horrible disciplinary battalion in Soviet Havana as well as another five year sentence in a prison near the Chinese border; the one who would walk around carrying weapons in the middle of the day and attack people like a beast, suddenly said: "baptize me!" For twenty years I had been praying for him, trying to convince him, urging him! Once in Pochaiv, I distributed my monthly salary among the legless people so that they would pray for Mykola's conversion. I prayed a big novena⁵⁶ for him and was sacrificing my life to God so that his soul would not be lost.

I baptized Mykola on November 14, 1996 at the church of the All Ukrainian Saints in Lviv. After the baptism I said: "now you can even take me alive and bury me in the ground, for the biggest dream of my life has come true!" In the most difficult hour of my life, my Lord gave me the biggest joy and silently spoke to my soul: "endure and carry your cross – I am with you." This baptism strengthened me spiritually.

After that I went to a silent retreat for priests not far from Kyiv. During a break, I went for a walk around the village and suddenly saw a giant drunken man who was digging a ditch. I started talking to him and found out that he was not baptized. I came and begged him but he did not reply. At the same time, a funeral was taking place in the village. I cried out to him: "and you Borys, are you going to be buried without a priest, just like an animal?" On the last day of the silent retreat, just before our departure, this man rushed up to me with his wife, mother, and with that old lady in whose apartment I had lived. Borys got baptized and had a sacramental marriage too. This man's grandfather was a priest and perished in the Solovki islands.⁵⁷ Thus, the sacrifice of that righteous man was not in vain, for his grandson became united with the Church. Such was the happy ending of our silent retreat. After my sermon, a priest came up to me, asked me about my surname, and was wondering if I was from Kaminets. He could not believe it was me because he was given a different description of me.

At that time, Father Izydor Honchar of the Basilian Order was my roommate (he later perished in a car accident). He was an extremely passionate and holy priest. It's with great delight that I look back at how we prayed and talked the owner of our apartment, an elderly woman, into having confession. She was originally from Podillia.

After the silent retreat, I was sent to Cherkasy to be as far away as possible from Kaminets. As I was booking tickets for my train and calling the phone number that had been given to me, I heard the following question: "do you think you will live on the terrace without heating when the temperature is -19 degrees Celsius? There is no church there and no parishioners. Where are you heading to? We will not be able to support you. If you have a parish and some parishioners, do not go there."

This was already too much for my head and I found myself in the hospital. My dearest friends started rescuing me. They would bring me two breakfasts and three dinners and suppers. I was feeding the whole hospital, and from the flood of good people my head began spinning. And on the feast day of the Epiphany, an announcement appeared in the press from my "religious friends" stating that all my baptisms, confessions, marriages, and Services were not valid. That was it! All of Kaminets was puzzled... "I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock." (Acts 20: 29).

On February 12, 1997, I left Kaminets-Podilsky and came back to Lviv with my dearest people left standing by the cross under the open sky. People who had raised one church from ruins and built another one with their own hands now found themselves in the waste-bin of life. Five of the best were excommunicated from the Church with special decrees. It was pure insanity! As Taras Shevchenko once said, "a beast would never do what you do to your brothers while kneeling in church." A normal human being who has not lost his or her dignity could not have accepted such blasphemy. Even the German Protestants addressed the leadership of the Church with an appeal to bring me back to Kaminets. Nonetheless, the community was knocking on the doors on various instances until they were told certain secret things. People got horrified by what they heard and for a year and a half, they would not dare to enter the church. In the morning, they would listen to the Divine Liturgy on the radio from

⁵⁶ A devotion with special prayers and Services over nine days.

⁵⁷ A horrible place in northeast Russia where many representatives of the Ukrainian intelligentsia were deported and killed in difficult circumstances.

the Vatican. Afterwards, they would all stand together by the cross near the church that was built by them and pray. We organized trips together to other regions of Ukraine, going there for confession and Communion. We went on pilgrimages to Zarvanytsia. In a year and a half, a new priest was assigned to them but their previous experiences would leave deep wounds in their souls that were not as easily erasable.

Of course, it was very difficult for me as well, and it is a great grace of God that after such an attack from Satan, I managed to survive. The only thing is that my soul was aching for the people who I wanted to bring to heaven. I especially felt shameful before people of other nationalities who came to our church during the time of my priesthood and had to experience all of this. One retired colonel met me once and said: “Father, what have they done to you? How could something like this happen in the Church upon which we had placed so much hope?”

On coming to Lviv, I met my friends whom I had long ago encouraged to become priests. There were twenty of them and some of them were trying to help me with whatever they could. The others would advise me to initiate a court trial because I had a document certifying that Patriarch Myroslav-Ivan appointed me parish priest of Kaminets-Podilsky and that the law was on my side. But I decided to emplace everything in God’s hands, not to sue anyone, and to let the Lord rule over everything. Then one respectful person told me that whenever the slightest possibility came around, I would be suspended and forbidden to give Services in the Church. “Watch out!” he said. To hear something like this and continue carrying my cross is not easy. It turns out that the priest who had left behind two churches and a golden community must be destroyed! We’ll see how all this will look on Judgment Day but I doubt that these people fear God.

It is only now that I have understood Christ’s words: “I am sending you out like sheep among wolves... Be on your guard against men; they will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues... All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.” (Matthew 10: 16-22). There will be inquisitive people who will ask why I did not mention the names of those “religious comrades.” My answer is the following: “one has to pray for them, and I am not the one who can judge them. It’s better to ask the Lord to lighten their minds so that they can be saved. Things won’t always be like this, time is not standing still, and life will teach how to laugh through tears.” Only seven years later did I meet in Zarvanytsia Bishop Vasyl Semeniuk who told me: “Father, I am grateful to you for everything you did in Kaminets-Podilsky.” It felt strange to hear something like that after what I had gone through...

A real priest must overcome the world and should carry his cross to the very end. The most important thing is to not succumb to anger although it might not be easy in such a situation and with such a military past. A priest must continue teaching people the truth, freedom, and love. “For the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge, and from his mouth men should seek instruction—because he is the messenger of the Lord Almighty.” (Malachi 2:7).

In most cases, people are good and they will bring their very last savings to church and in return, will receive some spiritual food and the word of God. Before a sermon, I always say to myself: “Holy Spirit, come to me and speak with my lips, for I am a weak human being.” People have to feel that the priest loves them because the lips speak out the passion that is in the heart. And we ought not to be afraid to speak the truth, because the truth will set us free and heal our soul. “If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ.” (Galatians 1: 10).

When I see people standing before me in church, a zealous spirit for souls burns inside me and I want to say a sermon that will make them fall in love with God and change their entire lives. Who knows, maybe these people will never hear another sermon again, maybe they will not live to see tomorrow? After the sermon, people often come up to me and express their gratitude for the word of God – then I know that my efforts were not in vain. But these sermons do not apply in any way to the “religious comrades.” Sometimes, I would hear them say: “do not speak about Ukraine, about abortion, about hell, about giving birth to children, you confess people the wrong way...” I look at them and think: “where do those people come from to be in a holy place? Is the devil speaking to me?” Adjustors look for comfort and seek to gratify people in order not to lose their parish. They celebrate Service in haste, preach about nothing, confess with neglect, and inflict harm on human souls. Then a

blasphemous Communion follows, illness, hospitalization, and the cemetery. “That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep.” (I Corinthians 11: 30). I tried to say something on a number of occasions and to remind them. All I would get in response was a scolding and malicious grin. I see that people who get at least some power think that they automatically receive the “gift of infallibility.” They are exactly those who cause trouble in this world. Power, money, and fame pull people down. “Curse those who do not do the Lord’s work and with all their heart! Curse those who do not slash and kill!” (Jeremiah 48: 10).

St. Anthony the Great gives great advice on the best way out from this filthy emptiness. He states: “save yourself and then thousands will save themselves around you.” And that is why in 1997 I finished working on a book entitled “The Little Treasure of Wisdom,” containing 300 instructive expressions. In 1998, I put together a collection of my poems, songs, and articles into a booklet called “Through Thorns to the Stars” and I also worked on a wonderful Akathist (prayer service) called “Grace to the Holy Trinity.” That same year, with God’s providence, I came across a golden vein and recorded seventy miraculous cases that had happened through the intercession of Metropolitan Sheptytsky. The book’s title was “Miraculous Gifts from Metropolitan Andrey.” Now people read this book, pray, place it on the infected areas of their bodies, and get healed. Of great help to me in this endeavour was Sister Inokentiya Sytko of the Basilian Order who was born in 1913.

In 1999, I published a collection of letters called the “Monastery of God’s Love,” as well as a book entitled “Why We Love Bandera,” in commemoration of the ninetieth anniversary of the birth of this leader. In this book, I revealed the religious and moral virtues of Stepan Bandera. The book is destined to those who want to build Ukraine today but do not understand that without God, nothing will be accomplished. Moreover, these people will only lose their souls. Only a holy man can bring to God the desirable sacrifice. In order to set others free, one has to become free from sin and then the Lord will bless his intention. He who is building a basement on a ground of sin will see his construction fall, and he who is building with God’s help on a firm foundation will see his construction and the state of Ukraine rise.

In 2000, I published a booklet entitled “The Ukrainian Giant of Spirit and Pilgrim of the Twentieth Century,” in 2001, “Stepan Navrotsky: A Victim for the Freedom of Ukraine,”; in 2002, I translated St. Jerome’s “On Preserving Virginity,” in 2004, I published “For Those Called for Freedom,” a general collection of works in 304 pages. Unfortunately, you have to suffer because of these books, even from the side of the clergy. Once I met a man who had been doing a monumental work – a magazine for priests entitled “Sower.” He was a layman doing a sacred thing for the Church but will probably be repaid by only God. This is what he told me: “Father, your books have saved me. With such unbelievable things being told about you, I read what you write about and realized that there must have been some misunderstanding.”

Initially, I would often wonder from where such evil people appeared in the Church, but then I began ignoring them. They do not understand that they will have to report about every single word on Judgment Day. How few are the people in this world who can overcome their pride and think about the good of their nation, about future generations, and work for one common goal. Life is an evil battle. Dzokhar Doudayev put it nicely with the words: “the dog is barking pointlessly but the caravan is moving.” One does not have to bother with this gossip, one has to do one’s job and save human souls, for life is given to us only once. “If you love and suffer, remember that only he who burns lives.” (N. Salvaneski).

Prison – a Sweet Home.

Once I was asked to confess prisoners in prison, and then to serve a Divine Liturgy for them. This was on May 20, 1997. I immediately felt that I had found myself among friends. For so many years, “prison was weeping for me” and it finally came to be... I could see how prisoners’ eyes were glowing from my sermons and we could easily get along with one another. There sat those with whom I had grown up on the same street and they knew very well what kind of trouble maker I was. A pretty good relationship evolved when suddenly, I was asked to start looking for a parish somewhere in the

countryside, for it had become too cramped in the city. I bid farewell to my prisoners and embarked on a little trip. I went to the village of Soukhodil near the town of Bibrka. There, hidden among the mountains and forests, stands the most beautiful wooden church in the world, the huge church of the Holy Protection with its seven domes. The architect was Ivan Levynsky and the painter, Anton Monastyrsky. The church was built by Hutsuls.⁵⁸ Inside, everything is carved as if in a fairytale. The villagers managed to retain extremely interesting and beautiful old customs. I was especially stunned by the funeral. In front, young men and women carried embroidered church banners with the casket draped in a white cloth. This symbolizes the purity of the soul that had confessed and taken Communion before death and was thus going to God's Kingdom. I wandered there for a month and became acquainted with good people. I have such luck in this life that wherever I go, strangers become dear people to me. From one woman who was a mother of seven children I heard the following golden words: "if it is easy to live now, then it will be difficult to die later."

I returned to Lviv and faced a lament: "prison is weeping for you, go back to the prisoners!" At home, I read a letter that was sent to me during my absence. "On Sunday there were only sixteen people present at liturgy, if you do not show up anymore, no one will go to church." It was an ultimatum! I was given the certificate of a prison chaplain and this was how I found myself "behind bars." Long ago, my parents used to frighten me with the idea of giving me up to prison – and so it happened. Maybe someone would not want me to say this, but I feel among prisoners like a fish in the sea. In what way am I better than they? I should have been in hell long ago for my sins, but God is still bearing my presence in this world and has bestowed mercy upon me. And so now, I must redeem my past. This is where I realized why I had such a broken childhood, why I served in such an awful army, why I had to go through Crimea and Rome⁵⁹ and through so many horrible things. It was all a prep school for working with those who have it the hardest in this world. I understand them from their perspective, for I know all too well what a slice of bread and a drop of water is, what betrayal is, and what villainy means. I know the feeling of being unwanted in life and having no right to anything; to feel like a driven beast looking to square the circle. How grateful I am to the Lord for being kicked in the face and in my soul with boots, beginning from the cradle until now! This path brought me to the crippled, blinded, paralyzed, poor, hungry, thirsty, bereaved, miserable, and imprisoned, simply to serve them with love! The stronger my faith, the more I feel my weaknesses and the more grace God sends me, the more I feel like a worthless animal.

To be a priest in prison is to walk on a tightrope between the guards and the prisoners. You have no right to join either side, for the other will start hating you and then it all goes wrong. A priest must set a good example of Christianity for both sides, get along with them both and with love, do everything so that they will get to heaven. Unsurprisingly, it is difficult for many to imagine how a cop and a zek⁶⁰ can both end up in heaven...

I believe that a married priest should not show up in prison for a number of reasons. Sometimes, you have to go right through or "play the fiddle"⁶¹ to make sure that the prisoner has clothes and shoes to wear, food to eat, and medicine to take. A family budget would never allow for that. Beginning in the seminary, we have to prepare future cadres – former jail birds are most welcome. The outcome will then be positive. If the young seminarians only knew what kind of happiness it is to save souls in prison, they would not dream of a "doll"⁶² and a huge parish, but would study criminal law and sew "striped" gowns. One has to serve God not for money but for souls, because this world is not eternal and we have to think about what we will bring on Judgment Day.

Of course, there are problems in prison and huge ones at that. This is because the state is not providing the imprisoned with work. It could all be solved so easily though...As a result, there is widespread illness and a high death rate among the young people. There is also a lack of clothes, shoes, medicine, and food-related problems are widespread. Someday, those who have created such conditions

⁵⁸ Ukrainians who constitute a special ethnic group living in the Carpathian Mountains.

⁵⁹ An allusion to a Ukrainian saying which means to be tested with money, power, and fame.

⁶⁰ A pejorative term for a prisoner.

⁶¹ i.e. to show sheer indifference.

⁶² i.e. future wife, in the slang of seminarians.

marked by sin and crime will stand accountable before God. It is a deliberate work of the Satanists. Some will ask: “why was there less crime in previous times?” The answer is very simple – under the communist regime we had flowers, now we have berries. Let’s remember here the words of Cheburashka⁶³: “we were building and building, and finally we have built without God.” Previously, people had stronger faith and morality. Who would see a drunken man, a smoker, a divorced person or an abortion? It was a rare occurrence but with years of industrious work, the devil’s servants did their work – millions of the most productive people were murdered with artificial holocausts destroying the bosom of the Ukrainian nation. Those that survived were “enriched” with devilish habits. And so today, we reap the consequences of communism: someone – the head, someone – the dead, and someone – on the plank bed. It is written in the Holy Scriptures that “there will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now and never to be equaled again. If those days had not been cut short, no one would have survived, but for the sake of the elect, those days will be shortened.” (Matthew 24: 21-22).

Christ’s Church is a fighting structure that is struggling for the salvation of human souls, for truth, freedom, and goodness. There are 240,000 prisoners in prisons all over Ukraine. Therefore, it is up to the Church to save their souls. A whole army of priests is needed – an army of warriors for Jesus Christ. And this must be a vocation from God, a gift given from heaven that is free of charge. One has to have a desire to give up one’s life out of love for one’s neighbour and to be ready to sacrifice for the higher idea. In prison, it won’t work to stick around with negligence and “profit.” These are serious people, chosen ones, and instantly capable of “smelling” what kind of heart you have and with what you have come to them. One has to love and take care of these prison lambs. Of course, the situation is not simple – there is a risk and one needs a working brain and a loose tongue. In prison, you must also be very smart. In addition, a priest needs to have undergone many things himself in order to understand a zek. But above all, he must have love! It overcomes the world!

In all my years “behind bars,” I have prayed to the martyr St. Josaphat in whose honour our church and community were named. He is very dear to me because he was zealous for saving human souls and was stabbed with an axe at the age of forty-three for massively converting people to God and striving for unity in the Ukrainian Church. St. Josaphat’s casket could not be closed for fourteen months because so many people were getting healed near it. In twenty-two years he was beatified and in 1867, he was proclaimed a saint of the Universal Church. In addition to this, a decree was issued in which Pope Pius IX said that if anyone dared to say anything against him, he would fall under God’s wrath and the wrath of the apostles Peter and Paul.

Many years have passed since I have been “sitting” in prison. A good pastor leaves the ninety-nine sheep and goes to seek the one that got lost (see Matthew 18: 12). If we sincerely open our hearts before God, then the Lord will use them for His glory and according to our talents, will give each of us a corresponding path in life. For example, I am not a computer expert nor do I have anything to do with space, but when it comes to the poor, handicapped, or imprisoned, I feel happy with them like a fish in the sea. Certainly, I could have served somewhere else and had a well-off life but my heart told me to take a thorny road to the stars. Soon I will die and God will ask me: “with what have you come to me and what good have you done on earth?” That’s why we have to hurry to do good while the sun is still shining, to be able to give up everything to become free and leave this world in God’s grace and not with dollars, a Mercedes, houses, and other foolishness. “On Judgment Day, many people will go to hell not for committing evil, but for not having done good deeds.” (Saint Jerome). He who has a brain should think.

My prison lambs are very nice and tender. Around 100 persons come for Divine Liturgy and on feast days, there might be 300 to 500. There are always many who want confession and fifty have been baptized. Their presence at liturgy means that they acknowledge God as their Creator. It is also a testimony of the faith in their hearts and a confirmation of the fact that they want to be forgiven on Judgment Day. People change their lives. I see how their faces radiate the light of God’s love and rarely in any church can one see people listening to the liturgy as attentively as in prison. There, where there is pain and suffering, there is also faith and salvation. Usually, the poorest people get into prison.

⁶³ A character from a popular Soviet cartoon for children “Crocodile Gena and Cheburashka.”

I understand them perfectly, feel sorry for them, love them, and want to be in heaven with them. By the way, the murderers help me out the most, they keep discipline, they are responsible, and they never skip Divine Liturgy.

I am often asked if I am not afraid to work in prison. And I reply: “the most horrible thing that I ever saw in my life was women shouting in church. They allow themselves to yell at the priest and even at the bishop. Their wild screams remind me of what Christ had experienced when a wild crowd was shouting: “crucify him!” If in prison someone opened his mouth at me, with this his story would end. Not long ago, a thief who had spent thirty-eight years in prison confessed to me! Although he was originally from Siberia, he learnt Ukrainian. Most of all, I was surprised by his modesty and humility. With his humility, the former criminal is opening a road to heaven for himself while those screaming are only collecting condemnation for themselves. “But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.” (Matthew 19: 30).

It is a great grace of God that people with such mangled destinies go to confession, realize that they have been sinning heavily, and are now changing their lives to unite with God. It is very difficult for all of us to understand that the first one to enter paradise was a criminal, not a Pharisee. And this criminal was not crucified for stealing chickens, but killing people. His repentance on the cross opened for him the way to paradise. And Jesus Christ, who is God in a human image, was crucified by the Pharisees, by priests who knew the Holy Scriptures. Society looks down on the zeks and at the same time, pretends not to notice how wretched mothers are murdering millions of children in their wombs. And very few of them regret committing such heavy sins, looking instead for excuses to justify the killing of innocent babies! Meanwhile, the prisoners come and admit without any dishonesty that they have done such and such evil.

One always has to prepare for the sermon in prison, for if it is not interesting, the prisoner will never come for liturgy and will not be saved. “I will make you fishers of men.” (Matthew 4: 19). Therefore I speak in a language that is clear to them. This is effective because they quickly grasp what I mean. Once on Easter, I told them how to the right of Jesus there was a wise criminal that was crucified and to the left, another man who was mocking Jesus. Then the wise criminal said to the foolish one: “are you kidding? He is suffering innocently while we are suffering for heavy sins...” When I blundered out that “are you kidding?” the prisoners burst with laughter. I said it mechanically and I later began laughing myself at what I had just said. So, this was the Gospel in “zek language.” Had I told a sermon in a usual place of worship using those same words, nobody would ever come again. But with prisoners, we are doing just fine, concretely and to the point without any fanfare. With a little bit of hocus pocus, everything is clear.

Work in prison requires various approaches for what’s the use of giving deep sermons if you see a hungry or barefoot person before you while you are telling him fairytales? There is an endless number of possibilities where speech can be fortified by deeds. Then the prisoners trust you, love you and as a result, change their lives and become true Christians. Around me has gathered a group of holy people who have been for years and on a weekly basis regardless of the weather, carriers of packages to prison. Others buy medicine, clothes, shoes, and all the necessary items. The head of the St. Volodymyr Foundation, Mr. Ihor Matushevsky, helps me out in many ways. I know him from childhood days when we both dreamed of coming together to devote our lives to God and Ukraine. On the feast of St. Nicholas, we have a tradition of giving a package with things and produce to each prisoner so that they can also feel that they are God’s children and that there are good people in this world who selflessly love and care for them.

One has to remember the following: prison contains people who were also created by the Lord and destined not for hell, but for heaven. They have eternal souls and need spiritual food and salvation. They are usually orphans, children from asylums and special homes, children of alcoholics, divorced people, people with a mangled destiny, and a shattered heart. They have never seen their mom or dad and were not hugged as kids, nor were they ever kissed or stroked on their heads. That’s why most of all, they need love, attention, tenderness, warmth, and a human touch. Many of them see a priest for the first time and that is why they hear for the first time in their life that Jesus loves them and that someone needs them in this valley of tears. And if their biological mother has forsaken them, than there is a

heavenly Mother, the Immaculate Virgin Mary, who loves them dearly and is always ready to come and help. When I speak to them about this to, I often see tears in their eyes, as well as hope for a better life in heaven. For me, zeks are my dear prison lambs, they are my happiness, they are my treasure!

I work not only with prisoners, but also with those who have just been released from prison and with those who want to find themselves there. One time, I was asked to give a lecture to racketeers. There were around thirty persons. They were listening to me for close to two hours, their mouths wide open. Later, we prayed together and they asked me to come again. In addition, I have some business with prisoners from many prisons across Ukraine. To be safe, I have been collecting all their life stories and the time has now come when good people urged me to make a book of them so that they won't get lost. I believe it will be of some use to many priests and will help them in working with people, encourage others to visit prisons, to treat prisoners with love and compassion and to do everything to prevent people from finding themselves in prison. Although all prisoners openly wrote to me with their real names, I have decided to alter their names for a number of significant reasons.

* * *

I AM THE LIFE, and you do not seek me.

I AM THE WAY, and you do not follow me.

I AM THE LIGHT, and you do not see me.

I AM THE TRUTH, and you do not trust me.

I AM THE TEACHER, and you do not listen to me.

I AM your FRIEND, and you do not love me.

I AM THE LORD, and you are not humble before me.

I AM your GOD, and you do not pray to me.

If you are unhappy, do not blame me.

* * *

**Death is coming – Time is running.
Life is passing – Eternity is awaiting us...**

REPENTANCE OF A CRIMINAL OPENED THE DOOR TO PARADISE (Luke 23: 43)

Taras, born in 1955, five times convicted with twenty-one years of prison seniority. I grew up in a normal family. When I was little, I would often go caroling⁶⁴ with my brother and sister even though it was forbidden. We would go from house to house and praise the Lord with our carols. I liked to play soccer, to fight, and to engage in hooliganism. I was as healthy as a beast. I could fight one-on-one with anyone and I would rarely lose. My soccer coach invited me to come for practice but I preferred hooliganism. At the age of sixteen, I was sentenced on charges of hooliganism but was granted probation. I started chasing girls and began drinking. In a year and a half, I was sentenced to three years of chemistry⁶⁵ for a scuffle. There I got acquainted with my first wife. In 1976, I stood up for my drunken friend. He was being taken by patrols.⁶⁶ I was sentenced to another sentence of four years. My family fell apart and I do not know anything about my son.

In 1980, I met Zenia, a nice-looking woman with black hair. She became pregnant with a man from the neighbouring house. She would run after me and would not let me go anywhere. After work, she would go to the beer barrel because she knew that that was our meeting place. In the evening, I would take her with me to the cafe. Zenia did not let other girls get near me and I could tell that she was jealous. I let her smoke and drink as much as she wanted because I never imagined that she would later become my wife. Time was passing and we were leading a laid-back life. I was not working. My mother was feeding me and saying to me, “son, please come to your senses.” I was fighting her off with jokes and my mother was worrying about me and she would not sleep at night. I loved my mother dearly and I would always defend her before my dad. But when mom would shout at me, I would instantly freeze and listen to her.

Roughly two years passed when I got tired of such a life, one that was full of drinking, fighting, police, and running away all the time. Moreover, Zenia asked me to marry her. She was doing everything to look like a future lady of the house and she even quit smoking although she was later beaten up for tobacco and alcohol on more than one occasion. Zenia and I registered our marriage with our daughter Oksana being born shortly thereafter. I started working as a cargo man at the poultry plant. In 1984, I was leaving work with the guys as we were carrying poultry meat in our bags.⁶⁷ The police took two of us, and they betrayed me and another guy who had escaped the night before. I, as a former inmate, was sentenced to four years of severe sentencing and the others were sentenced to two years of chemistry. Zenia stayed with the two children. She would come to me on dates and would often write letters. Our relatives would not dare say a bad word about her either.

Some time later I was taken to Komi to chop trees. I wrote to my wife and asked her to come and take me to the reservation settlement. She was reluctant to do that, but who is the head of the family? She was provided with an apartment and started working in the cafeteria. I was living with the family like a normal human being. For me, I look back at those years as if they were a fairytale. I did not feel like an inmate. In 1987, our second daughter Marichka was born and in December of that same year, I became free. My wife changed by that time, she began to clamour and yell and quarrel, believing that it was she who had sat in prison and not me. I agreed with this because I really felt as if were a vacation with her.

At home they greeted us nicely. I got a job in shoe repair. I would sit and hit my hammer from dawn until dusk to fulfill all the orders and to have something in my pocket. Life was getting better. In

⁶⁴ It is a strong tradition of the Ukrainian people, originally rural but then brought into the cities – to go to neighbours, friends, relatives, or even strangers after Christmas to sing carols and recite poems about the Nativity of our Lord. Usually, boys go from apartment to apartment to earn some pocket money, because each household is supposed to pay something for the caroling. Under the Soviet regime this was forbidden.

⁶⁵ Difficult work, usually connected with materials that seriously endanger one’s health.

⁶⁶ In the USSR, a voluntary people’s patrol.

⁶⁷ It was a widespread phenomenon at all state-owned enterprises that its workers silently steal the products and carry them home. The salary was very low, and since property, roughly speaking, belonged to no one, people brought in their own human justice. The Soviet regime fought with this phenomenon and in many cartoon magazines the “carriers” would be mocked but, frankly, the system and the regime only contributed to it.

the 1990's, my wife and I took an active part in almost all the rallies and demonstrations against the "red demon." She was a patriot and did not like the communist regime. I remember there was a huge rally and the police were trying to scurry us away and then the women stepped forward, including Zenia. The cops were shocked and did not want to fight the women.

I made arrangements for Zenia to work as a saleslady at the market. I noticed on several occasions that she was drinking. It would suffice for her to take one sip for her to want more. This made me very angry. I once saw my wife with a girlfriend. They were both drinking. I beat her up and said that she had to leave that job. I made subsequent arrangements for my wife to work in a bar owned by a friend of mine. I was thinking about our children and wanted to do something good for them. Various things were happening in the family and I was far from being the angel, but I loved my wife. I thought that she would work in that bar, bring some money home like myself, and then in spring, we would start building a new home. Life was moving on but things were not well between me and my wife. I talked to her many times, beat her, asked her not to drink, but all in vain. She continued with her old ways and would lie to me. I would come to the bar, see how she was licking her lips for more booze, and would go away so not to beat her in public. And then at home, another fiasco would erupt. I came home from work once only to find that all the pots in the kitchen were empty. I asked the children what each of them had eaten and heard the following: one ate a slice of buttered bread at my wife's friend's place and the other one ate with our neighbour. And then my wife came drunk, I hit her in the face and kicked her out of the house.

She went to the police. The cops arrived at my home in a couple of minutes and they told her: "write a complaint against your husband stating that he has beaten you." She sat at the table and started writing. I came up to the table and she turned away from me. I punched her in the face from the right side and she turned around. The cops went at me and I went at them. Soon there was a fight in the house. To make a long story short, they did not deal with me directly but instead called for help. I locked the door and went to bed with the kids. In ten minutes, there was a knock on the door. The cops had come with some backup. Previously, there were three of them and now I heard by their voices that there were more. They asked my wife whether they should break the door down and she said no. It was peaceful until morning and when my wife woke up, I was leaving for work. I told her that I did not want to live with a police informant and left home. I settled the whole thing with the cops with the help of a mohorych.⁶⁸ The children would visit me occasionally because for three weeks after that scandal, I lived by my mother's side. And when I am in trouble I do not drink vodka. I missed my children a great deal and my wife too, and was worrying that she would start jumping into buckwheat⁶⁹ for I loved this wretched woman. And as for the kids, I was dying to see them because I live for their sake.

That's why on Sunday I went home to see my wife. She was at home alone. She instantly jumped to me in joy, started saying that she understood everything, and that she would go to church and make an oath to God not to drink anymore. We made peace with each other. She gave me the keys to the bar so that I would open it on time and be able to serve customers in case someone happened to come in. She stayed at home to do some things and to clean up. When I was already at the bar, my colleagues came over and since we had not seen each other for a while, we began drinking. Because I had come to terms with my wife, I felt exhilarated. I was drinking vodka like honey followed by beer since there was no food to snack on. During that carousal, I noticed that my wife was also secretly drinking. I told her: "you promised that you would not drink anymore." She replied by saying: "Taras, today is the last time." Out of the great joy that I had come to terms with my wife, I became completely drunk.

How we closed the bar and how I parted with our friends, I do not remember. I woke up in my friend's backyard, two hundred metres from the bar. My wife was lying three metres away from me. I jerked to her at once; she was mumbling something with blood on her face. I started lifting her, shaking her, dragging her, but I could not do anything. Someone called for an ambulance and I started rubbing her, for it was -15 degrees Celsius outside. The last thing she said was: "Taras, I love you and I do not

⁶⁸ A strong element of Soviet reality: a certain amount of vodka that is drunk together or presented to someone in order to settle something or solve some difficult questions.

⁶⁹ A Ukrainian expression for adultery.

need anyone else.” Why was she saying this? I do not know. Why was there a scandal and why did I beat her? I do not know. I loved her so much! When the ambulance arrived, I went to my mother to ask her to look after the children. It was a mistake on my part. I should have carried my wife to the car and sped up the doctors so that they would do something. And while they were busy calling the police, my wife died. Sometimes it seems to me that she is still alive somewhere.

I was immediately arrested and was being interrogated about the whole night. The investigators knew me well and started advising me on what to say and how to put all the blame on my wife. Then a female investigator came to prison and said: “do not lie.” When I lied and made things up, she was happy. And so I talked myself into eleven years and six months of jail time.

The trial took place three months later. My wife’s relatives were very much against me. They wanted me to face the death penalty and were preparing to send my children to an orphanage. My older daughter told me at the trial: “daddy, I don’t believe that it was you who committed such act.” The younger one embraced me through the bars, clutched my neck and said: “daddy, we don’t have mommy anymore.” I do not know how I survived all of this and how my heart endured... After the trial, my mother along with my children and sister came and said that they were going to take the children. I knew my sister, brother, and mother – they would never give the kids up to an orphanage.

Thank God, the children would continue going to school, going to church, and reading the Bible. I am happy that I have been in close contact with them for all these years. They listen to me, visit often, and write to me regularly. During their visits, we read the Bible, meditate, and pray. I ask them sometimes: “why do you love me? I am the one who killed your mother.” And they do not believe me and say: “it was not you.”

My mother takes care of my daughters. If not for her, I would have given up long ago. She deprives herself of the last thing only to bring a package for me. The letters are written by my children and mother. And I had many friends, but none of them wrote a single note to me in nine years. In February of 2000, I had a visit. It was my mother and daughters who came for my birthday. The children had earned some money caroling and with this money, one of them bought me marshmallows and some candy, and the other one, half a cake. The kids brought me so much joy because they are hungry themselves, living in poverty, and yet, were able to save for me some pennies on my birthday. I am grateful to God that I have such a mother and such good children.

Frankly, to tell you the truth, if not for my mom and daughters, I do not know what would have happened to me. I always receive letters from them. I have food for thought and I have hope that things are not always going to be like this. The children already wrote two appeals in an attempt to shorten my sentence. The answer has always been the same however: “everything is correct.” I don’t mind, for I am guilty, but what’s the use of me idling around here? How many people are sitting here for the second or even third time while I am still here? Nobody shows any mercy to these orphans, nobody hears the cries of their souls. My kids do not have a mom and what use will they get from their father. But I always say: “God is good. The time will come and you, children, will be heard, and your life will be different, not like that of your parents.” I am very sorry for living my life the wrong way, sorry that I did not listen to my parents, did everything my own way, and for my wife who I was just wasting away. I am so sorry that my children do not have their mother; so young she passed away and yet she could have lived on to raise her children if not for vodka.

If at least one person reads this confession and ponders over his or her life, than I have not written this in vain. God gave a brain to human beings as well as a free will and he is not dragging anyone to Himself by force. There are two roads – one leads to hell for eternal torment and the other one, to heaven for eternal life. I am a great sinner and when I think about how the world is suffering for one single sin of Eve, how much more then will God punish me since I sinned 100 times more every day, and how many days and years were there? Here in prison, I recovered my sight while reading the New Testament, listening to believers, and visiting the prison chapel for Divine Liturgy which is served by a wonderful person, Father Ihor Tsar. Every Sunday he comes together with Yosyp Reshetivsky to our prison and sows the word of God; he brings warmth to this place, gives hope, listens to the confessions of prisoners, and helps with what he can, because here there are many people who do not

have anyone or have been abandoned. I am also striving to live for the sixth year already according to the teachings of Jesus Christ, for without Him I am nobody and nothing!

Glory to Jesus Christ!

28/08/2000 Thank you for the newspapers Father Ihor. They are read afterwards by those with whom I socialize and are later passed over to the sixth detachment and then to the seventeenth. You wrote a very nice article in "The Herald" regarding the intentions of zeks during liturgy and those of people in freedom. All the prisoners like it and may the people who read this article change for the better or think over what they are praying for. On my right during liturgy stands a fellow countryman. His shoes are in great need of some mending. We are both asking you for this and if there happens to be a chance, please arrange some boots for him for the fall.

07/09/2000 I am alright. Regarding the Azerbaijani Saliyev, I have to say that he was a foreigner among us with nobody bringing him food parcels. He lived only off the rations. He had a strong character, smoked, and liked to drink black tea, but he would never pick up cigarette butts on the street or wash socks for a cigarette as other zeks do. I treated him from time to time to what I could, asked him who he was and for what he was imprisoned. I called him my countryman, and he also called me his countryman. Some would laugh and tease us, for what kind of countrymen were we? On Sunday I came from church and spoke with him, told him all about Service, and what the priest had told us. I told him that there I had found respite from prison and could charge myself with energy for the whole upcoming week. Once, during our conversation, Saliyev said that he wanted to go to church and asked if he could. Well, why not, you are welcome!

During the first weeks, he could not understand many things since he barely knew Ukrainian and wanted me to explain everything to him in Russian. But I do not speak Russian out of principle because I believe it is a sin, to speak a foreign language while at home. This is what I told him and then would explain to him only in Ukrainian. He was also praying with us but in his own way by addressing Allah. I could hear certain phrases even though I could not make out what they meant. Every time he was becoming more and more interested and then he started telling me: "will there be church on Sunday and may I go? He liked the way you were talking about life in freedom in your church and about those old ladies who do not want to take Communion while standing. With time he began to understand everything that was taking place during Divine Liturgy and he felt a power pulling him to church on Sundays. He would tell me that he likes the priest with his interesting sermons and that he calms his nerves, brings him happiness, and cheers up his mood from such an interaction. And the most important thing is that he continues to have hope that God will help him, give him strength to go through everything and come back to his wife and three sons. This warmth he owed to you, Father Ihor. And how happy was he when you brought him the envelope! He prayed the whole day in his manner, giving thanks to the Lord and was writing a letter until late evening. Well, and then at the end, after he had passed the commission, he says that he will leave something for me because the majority of folks sell everything in order to have black tea and something to smoke. I thought he was implying this too, but after the trial he indeed gave me a sheet, a dunker,⁷⁰ and a spoon because he had broken mine some time before; and he invited me for black tea but I refused because I do not drink it before going to bed. He got offended a bit and said that it was his last tea bag and that he won't have anything to treat me with. But I told him that in the morning I would give him some more tea and he would have to brew it, but lightly. And so it was. We drank tea and ate candy, said goodbye to each other, and parted. He will not write to you because he cannot. Sorry for the handwriting. Sincerely, Taras.

4/11/2000 I have just finished the book "In the Devil's Hands." Thank you for the "For a Free Ukraine" newspaper because I read it religiously. I have not been to the TV room for four days already. In my prayers, I am asking God for the health of a girl named Maryana, for whom you have been celebrating Services during the last nine days. May the Lord bless you abundantly and help you in this

⁷⁰ Slang word for a homemade water heater.

matter. I have some time at work and this week I finished reading the Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Solomon, the Song of the Songs, and now I am reading the book of Isaiah. Although I do not understand everything, I feel attracted to reading the Bible.

Lately, my wife's relatives have not been giving me peace. Maybe I should write them a letter expressing my sorrow for murdering their daughter, sister, and my beloved wife. Do you think it would be right and how do you think they would react to such a move from my behalf? Maybe they will come to understand that I am the only one to blame and not my mother, sister, or children. Maybe they will start greeting my relatives, for now they are going their own ways and when they see my mom, they turn their heads the other way, and the same with the children. Maybe I am just pulling your leg in vain but these thoughts bring me no peace. I have no happiness, for I feel that I am guilty.

Well, with regards to the "gumps,"⁷¹ it is a very delicate matter. There are different kinds and the majority of them do not become that out of their own free will. I have just spoken to one of them. He will tell you something on this topic tomorrow during confession so that you may understand it better. And those who would live together (flip-flops,⁷² sissies) are not among the members of our church. There are some dejected homosexuals and we have to stay away from them, by this I mean not eating from the same spoon as them, not drinking from the same mug as them; not greeting them with a handshake, and not taking bread from their hands. But to look at it from the other side, nobody is taken to harem without reason.

At home everything is alright, the children write and send you their regards and Marichka says that she is praying for everyone, including Father Ihor. May the Lord bless her with good health. My mother is complaining that the children do not listen to her, shout, misbehave, and watch too much TV. I will soon go to them for a two-day visit and I will speak to them. But in any case, I am grateful to the Lord. On Sundays, the kids go to church together with my mother. Sometimes, they pray together at home and individually, as Marichka writes, every morning and evening. My girls want to dress stylishly and my mother cannot afford to buy expensive clothes. This also becomes a reason for whining. I would like to help my children so much, to ease their lives, but what can I do? Still, there is hope in the living Lord that things are not always going to be like this. Good night Mr. Father, and my apologies for the handwriting and for bothering you. One question though: during fasts in the middle of the week, are you allowed to eat anything or do you drink only boiled water? If you have no time to respond, I will not get angry. God is your friend. Sincerely, Taras.

07/09/2001 All is without change. Thank God, I am alive. I am fasting today until evening and praying more often. God is kind and all hope is in Him alone. Tonight, my mother came with a child but I do not know which one. They brought me a food parcel and I was sharing it with others for half a day because they also treat me to their food from time to time. There is a circle of people with whom I socialize, drink tea, and share slices of sausage or lard. With thanks to God, tomorrow is already Sunday and we have a day off. We will go to church. I am very grateful to you for everything. I am constantly praying for you, Yosyp, your family, the Church, and I am asking you to remember me in your prayers, for I am a great sinner. All the best to you, unworthy Taras.

14/10/2001 It is a nice day today. The Divine Liturgy and your sermon were very interesting. Your interview in the newspaper was superb even though you stand up for us too much. You see that even those who go to church are nothing but lambs in wolf skins. I even went to one of them in the afternoon. You gave him shoes and he exchanged them for tobacco. I think this pretty much does it, doesn't it?! Had he exchanged them for bread, I would not have said a word. But I feel so sorry for you. You drag here everyone you can, and this fellow is looking for profit in everything he can lay his hands on. If they did not fit his size, he could have given them to someone else, for there are many boys who do not have proper footwear. And then he says that he will come up to you again and ask for a new pair. I told him that I will not allow him to spoil your mood and that of Yosyp's at the end of Divine Liturgy. These are just silly things, but they upset me and make me angry.

⁷¹ i.e. most probably the ones practicing anal sex.

⁷² When two homosexual inmates take turns playing the male or female role.

I personally congratulate you Father Ihor, on the occasion of this feast day and express my gratitude for the shoes that you have given to Vasyl who is standing to my right. He expresses his gratitude and he is very satisfied. I am looking forward to taking a picture with you so that I could send it home. I have always liked taking pictures. Thank you for the newspapers and God is your friend.

19/10/2001 Thank God, today is already Friday. In the morning, we made a couple of little icons for you. Afterwards, we all went for lunch but I am not going because I am fasting today until evening. We are making little icons while it is still warm outside, for when it gets colder, there will be no opportunity. We are asking God for more warm weather because the cold brings us only trouble. I received a letter from home. They are writing to tell me that they are coming for a brief visit. And on Sunday they will come, maybe you will meet them. Tell my girls not to shout at their grandma and not to violate the fourth commandment.

20/10/2001 In the morning, I was jogging and doing exercises. For some reason though, my head was spinning. I am probably aging slowly and my kidney is troubling me all the time. Nonetheless, I have gotten used to it so much by now that I can hardly believe myself. It sometimes aches me so much that I become overwhelmed with fear. I want to live for so long, to get out of here, to pay back at least my mother and the children who have helped me so much during all these years. There is no work, most of the people are wandering around the mill all day long, bored, and earning peanuts. Some even crawl under the turning machine to have a nap but it is so unhealthy and dangerous for the lungs. After a while, the guys talked me into playing soccer with the first sector and we put on stake one hundred grams of tea – thirty minutes for each half with a five minute break in between the two halves. But ten minutes before the end, we lost sight of the ball because it got dark very soon. I am content because I have liked playing soccer since childhood. The news was interesting too. I am bored with that Vasyl who is making little icons with me. We can talk so much in one day that he would tell me one and the same thing over and over again until I could not take it anymore. Everybody is talking about the upcoming winter and they are asking to have the windows locked. There are forty-one persons in our section and almost everyone smokes, half of them are ill with tuberculosis, and the majority of them are drug addicts. I am the only one who is fighting here with them all for the windows, because I want to survive and get out of here healthy. He who takes care of himself is taken care of by the Lord. This cold spell is a new play on my nerves. I have to continuously explain to them that they should not smoke because fresh air is our salvation. One old guy even told me today that tuberculosis is not contagious. You see how smart inmates are nowadays. Now I am going to read something from the New Testament and fall asleep. Good night Father and sorry for the handwriting.

21/11/2001 Father Ihor, I greet you on this feast day. May God give you strength, health, the desire to follow Him and lead sinners like me. First of all, I want to thank you for the newspapers which you regularly pass over to us, for there is a circle of permanent readers. Thank you as well for the rosary. I gave the scarf to Yakiv; he is an orphan and needs it more than me. Twice I tried to approach Bohdan but unsuccessfully on both times. I want to get one of Bohdan's shirts because this Yakiv guy is really poor. For the second week I am making little icons on my own because Vasyl goes every night to work in the kitchen; he peels potatoes, beets, carrots, and chops up cabbage. He brings something for me and something for himself as well. I feel bored alone. People are talkative and we have to know everything but see nothing. It's cold, my right hand is injured and it is freezing. Today I had a lot of guests. I am making tea for everyone because I was saving it especially for this occasion. I like it light with candy because I cannot stand that black hashish substance that my friends drink. Before the afternoon, my head was spinning from those teas because I had to take at least one sip in order not to offend any of my friends. But I am happy because a feast is a feast and even in such circumstances, we remember God and ask Him for His blessing. Nonetheless, there are many who shake your hand and say: "greetings to you" and then instantly add: "and where is your tea?" Such people do not care about the feast day because for them the most important thing is to mooch some

black tea. I like to give it generously. And if someone does not suit me, than I won't give them anything and I can say this straight in their face.

But I am still grateful for this day. Early in the morning, I invited Jesus Christ to be my guest and I feel that He is with me because everything is going by so smoothly and so well. And for you, Father Ihor, I am constantly praying and it cannot be otherwise. For me it is already like a daily slice of bread with butter. You and Mr. Yosyp are constantly in my modest prayers, it's just not possible for me to forget you. If I had met such a priest in my childhood, maybe I would not have become a murderer of a dear person, but this communist system brought us up in a completely different manner. I do not feel pity for myself, but I feel pity for my mother and daughters. I deserve my suffering and they are suffering because of me and this does not give me peace, more so now when my daughter is in the hospital and my soul is aching because I cannot help her. The guys received a bread parcel from you. Yakiv received two buns, some onions, garlic, and Vasyl received three buns, some onions, and garlic. Our gratitude goes to God and you, Mr. Father, for we divided all this among seven persons.

22/11/2001 In the morning, I got up at half past five, did a bit of jogging, and prayed. One feels so happy after such exercise. I have breakfast at work and then I read the New Testament. Today is Friday and I did not go for lunch. The boss snitched on me to the guard. The latter sent a duty squad for me. I went to the watchman, settled everything, and thought that that was it. Little did I know. A whole wave of bad luck attacked me but I thank God that things are not worse. It will soon be eight years since I have been sitting here and I suffer because of inmates like myself. Therefore, this prison is called red; here the cops are afraid of the goat-like inmates-bosses and taskmasters. It's easier to find a common language with a cop than it is with a boss. The inmates are worse than those cops. He is sitting here for having done something wrong and then continues to do harm to the same kind as he is himself. How can the earth put up with someone like him? They are not afraid that one day we are going to run into each other and look straight into the eyes of one another in the life following death. But God is their judge. For me the most important thing is to go through these temptations, for my children are still small. I got angry a couple of times, but it was to be so because I myself am guilty.

My children visited my mother-in-law, talked about that house where we used to live and that has been standing empty ever since. The ceiling collapsed because of a leak somewhere. My mother-in-law has two sons-in-law, a son of her own, and a husband. And yet, nobody wants to repair the house for my children. Finally, grandma hit the older daughter and booted her out of the house and shouted that her dad had killed her mom and that they should not be defending him so much. Then the younger one said that it was mom who had provoked him into doing it. Grandma wanted to hit her too, but the younger daughter was swift and she hit her instead. These are my relatives from my wife's side. I told them so many times to let someone rent that house but they would not listen to me. This must not be interesting to you because these are my problems and when I talk them out, I feel relieved and become calmer inside. With respect – Taras.

30/11/2001 I am currently in the ward for the ill. The first night here was difficult for me. Rats run around the ward like horses. The guys put down a slice of bread on purpose to distract the rats from crawling onto the table. Indeed, they did not touch anything on the table. There are eight people in the ward and all are walking. The guys are young and brewed black tea because some of them received a parcel. Then we had a talk, got acquainted with one another, and they treated me the way it should be done in prison. There are also two elderly men but they are asleep all the time and are deaf. It is warm in the ward but filthy because of these rats. They have defecated everywhere and have torn the paper from the garbage can into shreds. I am afraid of rats and have to sleep by the window where they play hide-and-seek running along the window-bars. They crawl so easily, stretch their bodies and gaze at us, running away only when I open the window. If I wave my hand or flap a towel, they do not even think about running. They vary in size but some of them are very big.

01/12/2001 Thank God, the day passed in its usual fashion. There is a guy called Roman in the ward; he is twenty-one. He has asthma and is seriously ill. I can see this from his appearance. In the

morning, I greeted him with today's feast day and read him the New Testament. Then I wrote a letter to my children. For lunch, we had thick pea soup, and for the second course, potatoes and beet root. I got stuffed like a bull and slept for three hours. The guys were locals and often received parcels. As such, they treated me to some of their food. I am telling them about our church, how we were gathering lists of people who wanted to pray and drink a mug of black tea with the Pope. We've got here a chump from another prison who says that they were all given a box of sweets in honour of the Pope's visit. We were for some reason, deprived of such happiness although we were doing our best to be noticed. It is late, almost after midnight. The ward is silent. Some are lying and spinning their wheels. A whole loaf of bread lies broken by the table. A rat from the side of the stool came up to it, grabbed a piece, and vanished into a hole. And another big rat also took some bread and dragged it to the side where I was sleeping, under the radiator. And if no bread was left for them, they say that they won't let anyone sleep for the whole night, crawling and gnawing at anything and everything. A kind of parody, but what can we do, it has to be this way. As long as these rats do not touch us, for I feel like throwing up from them and I am also afraid of them.

03/12/2001 In the evening, the folks were taken for a check-up. In the morning, we made some order in the cell: washed the floor, the stool, and cleaned all the corners, for it seemed like nobody had done this in quite some time. During the day, they turn off the radiators and it becomes increasingly cold. The doctor said that my test results were bad. This ruined my mood because I wanted to be present at your birthday in our church. But God is good and in Him is all my hope. Now I will continue to further read the New Testament and then will write something to my children.

I gave a postcard to Oleh so that he would sign it for you on your birthday. I have just remembered something and I am worrying because his hands are not clean. You gave him a big notebook on Sunday. I was the last to leave the church and when I entered the section, I saw that notebook on his neighbour's bed. And I asked him on purpose, "give me one sheet so that I can write an application." He said: "I cannot because I have just bought it from Oleh for thirty cigarettes and he needs it very much." I later talked to Oleh and asked him why he was bothering you, looking for something from you and then trying to make profit from it. These people do not have anything sacred in their souls, they are lying heavily to you and are fooling you. I have already told you, send them to me. I am also credulous and I am myself often fooled but when you are being cheated, I cannot simply ignore it and continue watching them do this. Had he exchanged that notebook for a loaf of bread I would have behaved as if I had not seen anything, but giving it to someone for tobacco, black tea or cigarettes? Who can do this, Father Ihor, what kind of people, what kind of believers are they and why do they come to our church? In my opinion, it would be better if we were less in number but stronger in faith. There is another one who takes envelopes from you and then immediately sells them for a matchbox or tea. Guys come up to me and tell me about this and I tell them: "stay quiet, for I am afraid that one of the bosses will find out." The bastards are using your decency and make shame out of it to those normal people who attend your Services. Then, there are different talks about you due to such swindlers. It's not my business but I want you to know who surrounds you. Oh well, time for bed, good night and may God bless you and help you always.

08/12/2001 If You can, please bring me three or four light bulbs and one candle. I've got some problems in the cell-block with one jackass. He even went to the sanitation department to find out if I am really ill. I have not got your book with me and please provide me with it if you've got one. It's called "Through Thorns to Stars." If God provides me with a couple of light bulbs, please give them to me in such a way so that nobody will see. I am allowed to be here and I am really ill because I feel so, and the taskmaster says that one should not stay in bed during the day. We have got such jackasses here. Spoilt my mood in the morning, and the saddest thing is that he is just an inmate like me. And we suffer because of them. But God is good. Sorry – Taras.

14/12/2001 Greetings to you on this feast day, Father Ihor. The jackass says that freedom from work does not give me the right to lie in bed. A human being is ill but has no right to lie down. You

should sit in bed all day long because once you lie down, you violate the rules. We call our taskmaster a jackass, he is an old day guard in the cell-block. He is responsible for order in the sections, has a couple of more jackasses by his side who are washing the floors and preparing food for the folks in the kitchen. The administration gave great privileges to the jackass and we have to obey him like the head of the cell-block, otherwise you are going to be punished. I am slowly reading the book entitled "Pylyp Orlyk." Time is passing by. Today is already Friday. When everyone had left for work, I was praying in the closet where we keep our belongings, and afterwards, I was reading the New Testament. Although I'm not eating anything tonight, I still have to go to the cafeteria because I am fighting with the jackass and I have to keep up with the schedule. It gives me great pleasure when speaking with an officer here – a wise person. I see him only when I have to sign something but I like him as a human being and he is a decent individual. Good night, Mr. Father, and may you sleep well.

17/12/2001 Time flies at an incredible speed. I do not manage to do anything during the day. Yesterday after church, we were drinking tea. There were six of us, friends. We were drinking for you so that this day would be remembered by you for a long time. I had a conversation with my taskmaster because Bohdan had told him something about me. Bohdan did not know everything, but may God make for the conversation to be a good one. The jackass will be restless because he is resentful, spiteful, and does some wrong things. But we agreed to live in peace, and I will try to avoid him. This man wants to rearrange the prison in his way. If people like it, let him take charge of them. Good night, Mr. Father, and all the best to you.

31/12/2001 Very few of us showed up in church today because it is a working day. Nevertheless, everything went well because God was with us. There was enough time for some talk and for confession, and everybody was in a good mood. Thank God we have someone like Ihor Tsar who lives for people and not for himself. You are doing such a great job among us, the inmates and people who had no good inside of them. Because of you, many inmates have changed their views on life. You can believe me, a sinner. You have not been here for long while I have been among these folks for many years and have been looking back at those years and how things have been changing. Many people at the time of your presence Mr. Father, have pondered over their destiny and changed for the better. I can see this from my friends over the course of this year, the friends whom I had brought to church. They were scoundrels in everything. They were thinking only about themselves, about making profit, and did not know any prayers. Let's take Vasyl for instance. He's been going with me to Divine Liturgy for almost a year now. He has become a different man, his thoughts are different from those that he had ten months ago, and he knows all the prayers that are recited during Divine Liturgy. And such guys are many. And may they all follow the path onto which you, Mr. Father, have led us, for I am one of them. And I in general, have no idea of how to express my gratitude to you because you have taught me a great deal and I have in turn, taught my family. And many things turned out to be useful for my girls. May the Lord give a good and happy year and may you joyfully begin the New Year; may all your dreams come true in the New Year, and may the Lord give you good health and enrich you with strength to come to us because we need people like you, Mr. Father. There are many priests in Ukraine but there are few who would decline from earthly riches to rush to prison every Sunday and bring various goodies to us – thieves, murderers, hooligans... And the most important thing is the word of God that is saving and changing people. These folks love you just like children love their father; this flock is praying for you and thinking of you, and always waiting for you impatiently. My apologies if something does not sound quite right. I am saying this without any hypocrisy or adulation. Guys returned from work, ran up to me from the sixth and the seventeenth sections as well as from my cell-block, and I had to tell them about liturgy and who was present at church. I distributed to them your leaflets entitled "Everyone Should Know This," and even gave a few of them to some cops.

01/01/2002 Yesterday, we went to bed at 10 pm although we should have at 11 pm. In the morning, we got up at six. They are drinking our blood, there is no peace and the situation is tense for some reason. They have begun cleaning out the sections and we are all in the room where the TV set is.

After inspection, I began working on some little icons, gave the guys round wafers for a cake, condensed milk, and dried bread. I am not good at this and it's not a man's job. The guys drink black tea like ducks drink water. It's not good to drink so often. And I drank with them twice. I was thanking God for this year, for being alive and for the fact that my kids and mother are safe, that they come to me from time to time and that I have something to eat and drink. I bid farewell to the old year, greeted the new one, and, thank God, had a lot of fun watching the New Year's greeting on TV. However, I did not like it because there was no mention of God.

I greet you with the New Year, Mr. Father, and wish you all the best. The night was nice, and the day was also alright. Today is Stepan Bandera's birthday. We drank tea for the peace of his heroic soul. There's not much news here, everybody is minding their own business and the majority of folks are sleeping for what else can they do? The others watch TV all the time and I spend my time making little icons. God be with you!

06/01/2002 Today is Sunday and we have a day off. In the morning we were waiting for you and then parted. Fifteen minutes later, someone said that you were there and I started gathering people again. The cops even let us out from the sector but near the cafeteria, they stopped us and said that nobody was there. I had also seen Bohdan shortly before, and he said that you were going to be there the next day and I, together with the guys, was making sure you would come today. Again the communist regime is making trouble.

The four of us were having dinner. We were talking and remembering things from the past. At the end we sang carols. We had enough food, but still could not do without lard, and the number of dishes definitely exceeded twelve.⁷³ Everybody liked it, and the kutia⁷⁴ was delicious. My mom gave me all the necessary ingredients. Thank God, the evening went well, and we talked about you, Mr. Ihor. The guys love you, I can see it from their conversations and they are praying for you. Here we are depressed, humiliated, the cops are ready to deprive us of our last things and are looking for a reason to nag at us and then to swindle from us a pack of filtered cigarettes or tea, otherwise, they will write a report. But there you are, and from your sermons we learn to accept; you encourage us, give us hope that things are not always going to be like this. That is why we look forward to seeing you every Sunday. We have little time however, we talk very little, but I am grateful to the Lord even for this. Have a nice holiday, Mr. Father!

Christ is born!

Thank you for everything that you are doing for me and others like me. You made me so happy with that letter that I did not quite understand what it was all about. You were killing yourself all the time with the question of where to get..., but please do not take it so personally because you worry about me more than I do about myself. I do not deserve such attention, I have sinned heavily. And I understand this and in the eyes of the people I will always remain a murderer. But I am grateful to God that at least in prison I have come to know God, met such a human being, a priest from God like you Father Ihor. My road to all of this was not easy. I feel so sorry for my dead wife, whom I loved so much, and for my children who live in poverty with my elderly mother. But I am not blaming anyone, because I am guilty of all this. Had I known such a priest like you in my childhood, than my life would not have gone in such a direction. It is never late to come to your senses. When God allows me to get out of this hell, I want only one thing, I do not want to be changed by the world but I want to be with God so that I can serve Him. Also, I want to lead my children in the right path because they started swearing even before they learnt how to say mama and daddy...Every time I remember this, I start sweating...

⁷³ The Holy Supper on Christmas in Ukraine is supposed to consist of twelve meatless dishes.

⁷⁴ The most important Christmas dish made of poppy seeds, wheat, honey, walnuts, and raisins.

18/01/2002 The weather is quite nice these days. Vasyl is grinding poppy seeds because I still have some leftover wheat, honey, and a handful of nuts. We have to make something for supper.⁷⁵ I told him that he should have done this in the factory shop where all the tools are stored. He would not listen and did it his own way. He is a stubborn type who does not care about anyone's opinion. He has already broken a spoon and is now using pliers to grind the poppy. He's been torturing himself with that task for half a day already and with no results. Then he tried to grind the poppy using a wooden spoon. I am not even looking his way anymore because I'll just get even more fed up. Then I gave him some cabbage to slice for salad, and he is cutting it in huge pieces like in the cafeteria. I took it away from him and finished doing it myself. I then gave him the task of peeling beetroots because he was helping in the cafeteria yesterday and stole a couple of beetroots and potatoes. May God forgive him, because he was doing it not for himself. I gave them a mug of buckwheat so that they could cook it fast while I took care of the table. I took some cardboard from a box and laid it on the wooden bed, then covered it up with a newspaper, lit a candle, placed some kutia and two small bowls of salad. The guys were licking their fingers. We also had lard, garlic, onion, biscuits, halvah,⁷⁶ and waffles, topped off with one litre of instant coffee at the end. We had supper in the company of four. Before that we prayed. We ate for a long time, each of us recalling our own memories. When one talks, time passes quickly. Thank God for such a supper and thanks to my mother who passed me all this food that I managed to preserve until today. Not everyone in freedom can enjoy such a supper as we are having here. And also, Mr. Father, thank you for the medicine. I take it twice a day, in the morning and in the evening before going to bed.

Christ is baptized! In the River Jordan!

19/01/2002 In the morning, I took a stroll outside and prayed while everyone else was still asleep and not bothering anyone. Vasyl has made black tea already. I said a couple of words to him before his departure and took a sip of tea, so that they would not look down on me. Despite this, everybody is well aware that I do not drink black tea in the morning because I have holy water instead. But seeing someone off is a big deal. When everyone left for work, Vasyl and I drank some tea with candy and discussed certain things. I saw him off to the gate. He took off his jacket, we shook our hands, and I kicked him in the bottom so that he would never come back here. When I put on his jacket, I found his rosary in one pocket and I ran after him and shouted at the door that leads to the duty office. He heard me, came downstairs, and I returned the rosary to him. He walked to freedom wearing sporty attire but will most certainly need some more warm clothing for the winter. I hope God will help him. He is a good fellow. If his mom and dad do not accept him as their child, than there is something to ponder about. He needs someone to stay by his side and to control his actions. After two sentences, he spent ten years here. At the end, I taught him the lesson of an old lady. She had told me once that during the famine people were faced with hard times and would rather die than take something that did not belong to them. May God give him a chance to change for the better. There is a church nearby and one can hear the priest very well. He is serving Divine Liturgy over the microphone. The day is so beautiful, but it is cold to stand outside. Best regards to you. With respect – Taras.

Christ is born!

20/01/2002 Thank God, everything is without change for me. For the third day already, I have been cooking the herbs that you gave me. I saved a handful and am now using them. I am also drinking flax at work, but there has been no improvement in my health. On the contrary, I sometimes think that I will cash in my chips. We were waiting for you but whatever we would say to them, we were not let out. Many people went to watch TV and some went to bed. Our faithful guys lost a good deal of nerves, because all were pissed off that others have such privileges and we have to sit locked up. In the evening, we had arranged that on our way to Divine Liturgy, we would be singing carols at the sector near the cafeteria. But when we were going out, we were not doing it all at once and we were disorganized.

⁷⁵ The second supper after Christmas is on January 18, before the holiday of Christ's baptism in the Jordan river. It is the closing holiday in the series of Ukrainian winter holidays.

⁷⁶ Eastern paste of nuts, sugar, and oil.

Some left earlier, others later. Only a few people were singing. Some were afraid of the cops, others were ashamed, and the cops appeared too stunned to say anything. And when we approached them, I could see smiles on their faces. But I still thank God for that. We did what we planned to do, for we wanted only one thing: to cheer up the people and the kids that were with us. I think that everybody liked the liturgy, your sermon, and the performance of those sincere angels. One could see it in the frame of mind of my friends. And then it was felt in their conversations because those who were not present and slept right through, were very sorry for being absent on that day at church upon hearing what their fellow inmates had to say. Thank you, Father, for having organized such a wonderful event for us.

Yesterday at church, I took some calendars and pictures of the Pope for some guys who were at work but regularly go for Divine Liturgy. The guys are glad that you remember them. It was pleasant for them and a bit strange. I gave one calendar to the warrant officer. Fedir says that once you brought soil from the grave of St. Mykola Charnetsky and that it is helping him health-wise. He also hides it from the cops because they do not notice those who carry this soil with them. In my cell-block, there is an inmate who had a puncture in his lungs and was healed by this soil. I will try to bring him to church on Sunday. If you can, please bring us some more healing soil.

Yesterday, my portion of bread disappeared. Today, I purposefully left two packs of cigarettes and some bread, but again, one cigarette went missing. And the day guard was watching, and when I came back from lunch, the cigarette was gone. We know who it was but we wanted to have this rat-thief caught in the act. We have got such a swindler here who drags one cigarette from a couple of guys at once. I had a talk with him. Even the head of the cell-block questioned him but he denied all the accusations made against him. Nevertheless, everyone knows that he is the thief. And the idea of beating someone for cigarettes puts me to shame. Let him go with God. Maybe he will understand something. Good luck to you and sorry.

01/02/2002 You know Mr. Father, since I have been making little icons, I have become calmer and more accepting. I do not pay attention to certain things that a year ago I would have been yelling at. I am grateful to God that I have something to do and that time passes by. I received a letter from my children. They are telling me that I should not remind them of who to pray for or who to include on the prayer list during Divine Liturgy because they constantly remember to pray for you. I even became surprised when I read it. Well, at least in this way, I can be proud of my daughters. Good for them, maybe someday they will become true Christians. As for now, they are still kids.

02/02/2002 In the morning I was washing and bleaching some things because yesterday I found a louse in my shirt. It seems like I am looking after myself and do not let anyone sit on my bed but they still appear on my bed from time to time. Thank goodness that I have the opportunity of bleaching my clothes in boiling water, for not everyone has the means of doing this. Then I was reading the New Testament, writing a letter home and to Vasyl who is free already. He came to my house. He brought a tube of crazy glue with him and my mom will bring it to me. He is still being watched.⁷⁷ The cops demand that he submit his passport, but the most important thing is that he was welcomed nicely at home because he is a thief. He must have robbed his own parents too and must have really set them off if they never came to visit him in three and a half years. During the last year, I changed him a bit but I won't be there to constantly look after him. God is kind and if he prays, things will get settled with him. He is sending his regards to you, Father Ihor. I think your school will also be of some benefit to him. Good night Father Ihor and take care of yourself.

10/02/2002 Today we are all off from work and I have been looking forward to seeing you, Mr. Yosyp. The liturgy was very nice. You spoke so well about those who seek a loophole and not God. We must believe in God and trust the Church, for what priest or Church would teach us to do badly? I do not understand those people who have been going to Church for many years, who read the Bible and those newspapers that you bring. We talk, debate things, but they do not want to go for confession, and

⁷⁷ i.e. under strict control by the police for one year after leaving the prison.

moreover, mock at me for doing so. I simply stopped conversing with one such wise man. He seems to be alright but refuses to go to confession. He says that he repents before God and when I explain to him that that is the priest's job, he just doesn't get it. Today, I was trying to drag one guy to church. In the morning he told me that he was going. I gave him a sheet so that he would write down the names of his relatives who he wanted to pray for. He wrote them down and gave the sheet to me, and then, after the check-up, he disappeared and did not go to church. I came and asked him what happened. He is rotting all over and does not want to go to the sanitary section. Furthermore, he is ill with tuberculosis. I gave him a little lecture and explained to him where the doctor is and other people who will help him here. Of course, I meant a real doctor and not the one who had called him to drink while drawing him away from church. He's not a bad guy, but I feel sorry for him more than he does for himself. He turned flush red, went silent, and in the future, I will not get off his back. I understand that one should not force something upon someone, but sometimes this may lead to a good thing.

23/02/2002 Thank God, we are alive. The guard's eyes began to glow when he saw the picture of the Bandera men. He turned it in his hands, took a closer look at it, and then said: "give it to me." I explained to him that the photo belongs to me. I worked on it for a whole day, stitching it four times and unstitching three more times. I eventually finished it. When he came and saw it, he said: "it is an icon and we have to pray to them (the Bandera men)!" He is originally from a Bandera family. His mother was a messenger for our Cossacks. Now she is already eighty-four. If I am not mistaken, she went blind but has a sound mind. He told me a lot about his family. In his village, there is even a street bearing his surname. It is in honour of his aunt who was shot dead by a Bolshevik in the blossoming years of her youth.

I had visitors come to me on Friday. My mom came with my younger daughter and surprised me by bringing someone else who I did not expect to see: my brother. He stayed for some time and then went back home. I asked him to stay overnight but he would not. But I chatted with him for a bit since we had not seen each other for a while. He gave up smoking a long time ago but has heart problems nonetheless. His daughter is going blind, his son is ill, his wife had an abortion, and they do not go to church. I told him something, explained to him that for the sake of his children, he and his wife should go to confession and repent, for it is because of our sins that the children are suffering. He did not promise me anything. I prayed together with my mother and daughter and I read them something from the New Testament and a religious book where the priest answers questions of ordinary people. We had food to eat and beverages to drink and time passed quickly. I wrote a letter to my sister in Spain. Maybe it was a bit rude for me to do so but I let her ponder over certain things because I see that life is too good for her there and that she is starting to forget about her family.

Today I turned forty-seven. It's hard to believe that I am so old. In the morning, I did some exercises and jogged. After that, I prayed and invited Jesus to be my first guest. I do not regret it, because the day passed smoothly during the worse shift change for cops. I made some black tea and treated the guys to it, and so it should be, for they must feel that it is my birthday. Thank God, everything is alright. And yesterday, I received a letter from home and I know that you spoke with my relatives. They are happy that they were able to have you as a guest in their home. I will be praying for them and I ask you to help me in that. I always pray for you, Mr. Father, and today too, because on Fridays I pray a lot more than on any other weekday. Maybe the reason for that is that I am fasting and want God to make real Christians out of my two children. Good night, Mr. Father, and may you be well this evening. With respect for you – Taras.

03/03/2002 Thank you so much for such a wonderful Divine Liturgy, and also for the sermon, because my heart was aching from pain and shame because I am no better than that son who saw in the eyes of his mother his own sins, the sins that had led her to misery. My mother has been treating me well all my life, and she gets nothing in return. I am so sorry for my mom, but what can I do? There is only one thing left – to pray and ask God to give her the strength to endure everything and to wait for me. In the afternoon, the guys came and invited me to play soccer for our section's team. Although I am old already, I still like to play. In a couple of minutes, I was wet all over. My entire face was

covered in mud. We were playing forty minute halves but fifteen minutes before the end, we parted because the opposing team began to panic. We easily won with the final score being 13:2. With that win, the guys also got a litre of black tea but I did not go to drink. I did not want that tar. May God give me better health from all that running. Alright, good night Father Ihor, and may the Lord help you publish all your books. I will be praying for that.

At work, everything is fine but I am constantly tense and afraid that one of the guards will catch me in the shed. After supper, I went upstairs because they told me that there was an officer on duty. He had no time to chat but said that he had heard a conversation about me and that on Monday afternoon they were going to call me to judge me and decide on what to do next with me. But God is kind and if we survive until that day, than somehow things will work out for me. I have divided the soil from the grave of Charnetsky into three parts. I am distributing one part in the section, I have given the other to Mykhailo for the sixth section, and I am going to give the third one to Volodia from the fifth section.

I received a letter from home. My first wife and son came to my home. They did not know that I am doing time in prison. I saw my son for the last time in 1980, and now he is twenty-seven. He completed medical school. For five years already, I have been a grandpa and have learnt this only now. My son was traveling back home for vacation from Italy when he was robbed somewhere close to home. They took everything, including his documents. This is what brought them to me. If not for this unfortunate incident, my mother would have never seen her grandson, and my daughters – their brother. I would have never known that I have a daughter-in-law and a granddaughter. They were traveling with high hopes to my home, expecting me to help them and advise them to which petty criminal they should refer to, but all in vain. The most important thing is that he is alive despite being beaten and tied to a tree for four hours. This will forever serve as a lesson to him on how to behave and who to listen to in order to avoid falling into a hole. On the one hand, I am very glad that all of this happened, because now I at least know something about my son. Even when I was free I often wrote to him, greeted him on feast days, on his birthday, but there was never an answer. And when I sat here, I decided not to write to him until I get out of here. He was six years old when I visited him for the last time, and now my daughter wrote to me that he resembles me, is six feet tall, and dresses smartly. My daughter said that they stayed for only a short period of time because they were in a hurry. May the Lord give them the power and the desire to follow Him. My apologies, and pray for me, a sinner, because this week was so difficult for me and every day was like a new adventure. But I am grateful to God that He provides me with the ability to endure. Good night.

15/03/2002 At noon I was taken to the commission. The talk revolved around the knife. Why do I keep one under my bed? The head of the cell-block demanded that I be placed in solitary confinement for fifteen nights and days, but the officer on duty helped me out and said that certain work had been done with me already and that there was no need for more punishment. Well, thank God and God's people for standing up for me. My thanks also goes out to you for praying for someone like me, because one friend is constantly harassing me by saying that I am just using my faith for my own benefit. But what can I say or do? They asked me if there was no agitation from your part and I wrote that you had never agitated any of them. I am often checked and that's why I cannot write about everything. I'd better tell you everything orally one day, plus the guards may not like this scribbling. But the officer praised you and said that you are also doing great work in prison.

23/03/2002 I didn't write anything, for I am constantly being watched. Today, I came back from work and thought that I should write something. After that commission on Friday, I felt really exhausted and worn out. On Thursday, I saw Mykhailo from the second section. He was also called out by the operatives and they asked him about me and more generally, about who talks what in this area. I have no idea of what he said or wrote, but during all these days, I am being watched closely by fellow inmates and warrant officers. They scour me on every occasion. There are lots of seccols⁷⁸ though, who

⁷⁸ Secret collaborators, folk nickname: "seksot," i.e. *sekretny sotrudnik*, in Russian, for people who in Soviet times worked for the KGB and were ready to betray anyone for the "wrong" behaviour.

do not care about anything. These people are dangerous because they say one thing and then listen and do what the guards order them to do. I was deprived of many books, even the ones that were written by you, "Why Do We Love Bandera?" and then, "Through Thorns to Stars." I do not even remember what I had, but a lot of books went missing. I am tired because I am constantly tense. But I am not afraid that I will be imprisoned again or that someone will write a complaint about me or that they will deprive me of something. I always say thanks to God and believe that this is the way it should be. It is like happiness for me to suffer but now I have to be quiet and not bother the guards. I have got children and a granddaughter, and I am thinking about them. Well, regarding the seccols, I do not want to write anymore about them. There are many of them here and I am praying for them. I treat them well only because Jesus Christ wants me to. I am very angry now and maybe I have written something incorrectly. If that is the case, than please forgive me. There are some things that I am too ashamed to say before you. So far everything is alright, they do not touch me. They probably have no time and they must be hesitant, because I see that they are angry with me. I failed to unite Christians, but thanks to God, there are also those with whom one can go scouting.

I was going to have supper and met Bohdan on my way to the cafeteria. I asked him how he was doing and what was new with him. He replied by saying that you are having great troubles. I felt bad inside but refused to believe him. This just cannot be true, and the guys do not believe him either. Everybody is waiting for Sunday and praying for you in the meantime. God forbid for you to suffer because of us. I am constantly praying for you, for Yosyp, for your family, the Church, because I cannot live without these prayers. It's been almost a month since you have not been let in and we feel like orphans here. We are all lacking something. The guys with whom I talk say the same. May God bless you for coming to us on the feast of the Annunciation, so that we could hear your voice and some news from the other side of the fence. I have not written everything here and neither have I done it openly, for I am afraid that this letter may end up in the wrong hands. All earthly good to you.

Glory to Jesus Christ!

12/04/2002 Today is already Friday. First of all, I would like to thank you for the newspapers, for giving me and the guys something to read. The doctor made two injections into my gums, inserted a filling, and then all of a sudden, the cops came because it was time for them to do their check-up. I however, was not there. At least they were not writing a report but gave me two kicks to the butt. It is the first time in the last eight years that I received a kick as a way of reminding me of where I am. I thanked them for this and at that point we parted.

Tonight, as always, I am fasting and praying. I gave some tea to the guys so that they would drink it on the occasion of my mother's birthday. She is sixty-six today. May God give her health and patience with such horrible things taking place in the world today, such foulness, dirt, and disrespect. One priest surprised me. Who ordained him and how can one speak and act like he does? God is their judge. And the people get disappointed, and some even start pointing their fingers because there is a reason to hurt and humiliate us, the Greek Catholics. I wonder, will they continue being priests? Please excuse me, but I cannot understand this. It seems that from the very beginning of their studies, they were attracted by comfort and profit and if the clergy behaves in such a way, than what should be expected of guys like me and those around me? Thank you for those "Sower" booklets. I found in them interesting things for myself, and the boys are reading them with delight. On Tuesday, Myron brought me a bun and some garlic. Thank you, it was very tasty to eat fresh bread and it feels so good to know that someone is thinking about you. With respect to you – Taras.

29/05/2002 In the morning, I was able to see my mother and the girls. I was in the third room. They have already renovated it. I wish they would bless those rooms and hang an icon in each of them; that would be much better. We had a great time together, reading a lot, meditating, and often praying for long periods of time because I became charged with a lot of spiritual power. It was such pleasure for me to pray with them, such joy in my heart, such relief. They support me with their requests to the Heavenly Father. I expressed my gratitude for everything and everyone, and first of all for Father Ihor,

cantor Yosyp, for our prison church, for those guards who allow inmates to go to church, for my family, for my mother who is having so much trouble because of me, and for my sister and brother who are compelled to go abroad to a foreign country in order to earn a living. Indeed, as Christ said, “where two or three are in my name, there I am among you.”

My mother, and to a greater extent my girls, are constantly praying for Father Ihor. I have heard it a couple of times during these two nights and days. I am happy that the children are at least learning something from me, because they hear from my conversations who I am talking about. May God give them a happy destiny and everything that they need to serve Him honestly, because for some reason, I worry that they might follow in the footsteps of their mother. I know that there are many children nowadays who wander around highways and forests, earning very little with their bodies. It was sad when we had to part. I had to remind my children to take care of their grandmother, to listen to her, to tell her not to think and worry about me, my sister, or brother. Her heart is really aching for all of us. And if God allows for this, than we will all meet soon again.

01/06/2002 Thank God, I am alive and everything is alright. I am currently in the penalty cell-block. A soccer match has started on TV. We watch three games every day. I sit in the back where we have three tables and write letters, look through newspapers, make icons, and at the same time, glance at the TV. It's truly a resort here. As long as you follow the rules, don't stick your nose into anyone's business, things should be alright for you. A couple of icons must be given to the visiting rooms, so that people can see them and think of God at least before going to sleep. They threw one more guy to us from the hospital, he is mentally ill, and one more who was abandoned. As they say here, he has a “red label,” meaning that he is a violator of the rules. But this one they say, likes sex, therefore, the label is red.

Four persons have been transported from us to other cell-blocks. One was thrown to us from another prison and another one was thrown into the “pit” for fifteen nights and days for quarrelling with the guard of the department. If I were given permission to go to church on Sundays, I would stay here until the end of my term. In the evening, I will pass the little icons to Myron along with some scribbles for Divine Liturgy. I will ask him to bring six blessed icons back to me. I will hang one over there where the TV set is, and the rest I will give to people who come for visits. The main thing is that they are blessed and then one can pray to them willingly. We have got here big icons of the Mother of God and others, but who blessed them? I am praying for you and I feel sad. At times I am bored. I received a letter from home. My mother is angry that the children find time to visit their friends but never bother to go to the garden to collect beetles.⁷⁹ Children also need to be understood, they can't dance all the time to only our music. Taras.

23/06/2002 I have just read four booklets of the “Sower.” I came across many things for the first time, interesting sermons. I like to read about them. In the morning, I try to get up earlier, exercise, do a bit of jogging, and move around so I don't turn into an old man. In the afternoon, Myron handed me some newspapers and books for which I am very grateful. I have no trouble here, do not worry about anything, do not think about anything; I have enough food and sometimes even eat something in the cafeteria for lunch. More often though, I cook something for myself, as long as I have some raw ingredients. God is good and things are not always going to be like this. If I am to think in such a way, we, the serious criminals, are the first ones who need spiritual food and confession. It is convenient and easy for someone to humiliate our human dignity. There, on the other side of the fence, you can still defend yourself while here you are deprived of such an opportunity. The only hope is in the living God, because time does not stand still. I am even grateful to destiny for bringing me here and for suffering all the turmoil while understanding who I am in this state.

I watch the news, read newspapers, and talk to those who are interested in life, but the majority of them say that life was better under the communist regime and that they want to go to Russia. As they

⁷⁹ It is a common thing in many rural areas of Ukraine to fight the Colorado potato beetle by gathering its larva to let the potato bloom and produce young tubers, and then even by gathering the beetles from the potato plants. Usually those are gathered into a bucket and then either smashed with a heavy object or burnt with gasoline.

say, a slave will always remain a slave regardless of the flag. I would oust these people from the state so that they do not pollute society. But God is good and one day, He will bestow our politicians and justice officials with wisdom. After the check-up on Wednesday, the schedule shows that we will be having a class on political information and civics. The taskmaster is reading a book about war in Russian but everyone has their own thoughts and half of the people are dozing off. Today in our section we had two fights. One guy has already been punished with solitary confinement for five nights and days. I do not know anything about the second guy. They are all newcomers and do not know the local regulations. I am watching the World Cup soccer tournament. I have read the book about Father Pio and half of one book dealing with psychics. Some other guys are reading it too. This is already a good thing.

27/06/2002 I was watching the news. Somewhere, a bus with kids fell into an abyss, somewhere else, planes collided and so many people went to God...This is all for our sins, because nothing happens without a reason, but how do those parents who sent their kids on vacation feel? It is a tragedy, and the kids left this life to avoid falling deeper into the sins of this world, because they do not yet have mortal sins, but suffer for all the people in the world. God's will is present everywhere and one can do nothing about it. Yesterday in the evening, I was reading a book entitled "Road to Salvation." I was so much surprised for having not known certain things. I liked this booklet so much that I could not stop reading. I did not read it to the end but I am very grateful to you for it. My girls will have something to read during their visits. I've been meaning to ask you to find some spare time to help me educate my girls. Please write to them in this regard and how they should be treating their grandma, whether they can say such things as: "I do not want to, I won't, etc." If you have a book by Charnetsky, send it to them in an envelope because I see that soon I will completely stop writing to them. I already do not know what to do with them and how to direct them in a Christian path. Please forgive me for causing you additional troubles with my own problems, but I see no other way out. I think that a couple of words from you will help my girls change for the better.

05/07/2002 Before noon, I was reading a newspaper in the section on my bed and had a nap because I felt really tired. In literally five minutes, the jackass started grumbling, asking me why I was sleeping, if I was really off from work, and so on. I am not afraid yet, but when the cold days come, it will be difficult for me to walk all day long. Also, I want to ask you although I do not feel comfortable doing so, to make me a bread parcel because it is no longer the way it used to be here and exchanges are no longer allowed. The most important things are: garlic, onion, and some lettuce, because they treat me here and I feel reluctant to take any more. And a parcel would give me the chance to see people, because when you go to pick up a parcel, the guard is nowhere to be seen. But if you can't, I will be understanding and will not be in any way offended.

06/07/2002 Myron glanced out the window and we exchanged a few pleasantries with one another. He's a really good guy. I am sitting in the sun and writing. I am also reading and have even started learning the English alphabet. There is an English tutorial in our sector that is headed by one guy who reads, writes, and speaks English. I decided to go there myself. I don't know if something will come out of this, but one still needs to give it a try. Maybe I'm learning, but it's hard when your memory is not as sharp as it once used to be. My greetings go out to everyone and especially, cantor Yosyp. Pray for me, a sinner, because I'm susceptible to all kinds of influences here. I see that prison does not change – he who does evil is praised and loved here because they are all afraid of him while the good guy is always portrayed as a coward. Everybody does their best to mock and humiliate him and this makes you want to blend in with everyone else so that no harsh words are said about you. I live among wolves here. Like in the wild, the weakest and meek are devoured by the more powerful. I know that one has to be kind to others but this approach simply does not work in such an environment. In prison, being kind won't suffice and I do not want to be two-faced either. And so I suffer, for as long as I can. Back in the day I went to church, confessed, and for some reason, I did not pay attention to such things. And now I compare them with people who I knew from my past. They now think of themselves

as being big shots and I am no longer seen as a person in their eyes. People say that I am racing, that I am obsessed about religion, and that I am using it for my personal benefit. And I think that I am the same old person today as I was back then. I have only come to the understanding that one day, we will all stand accountable before heaven and its master. God is your friend. Yours truly – Taras.

16/07/2002 Thank you for the newspapers, envelopes, and the book about Father Menio. Thank you for not forgetting about me, a sinner. In the morning, sometime around six o'clock, Myron was lowering a bag from the second floor containing films, cardboard, and oil. At that moment, the officer on duty approached us since he had seen us from the square, yelling as he made his way up. Myron quickly pulled the bag towards him but there are bars on his window and his hand managed to save only the oil. The cops took a look at the bag that had fallen on the square and seeing that there was only cardboard from a laundry detergent box and a few films, they took the bag, threw it away, and left. The officer on duty was also silent. Thankfully, the story had a happy ending but I was worrying for Myron all afternoon until I saw him. He told me that no one had gotten him in trouble. My greetings go out to everyone and especially Yosyp. I am praying for you and I miss you a great deal. Yours truly – Taras.

18/07/2002 Yesterday, they called me to get my parcel. Inside there were five chocolate bars, one kilo of onion and one kilo of garlic. Thank you very much. I gave a chocolate bar as well as some garlic and onions to Myron. I then invited six buddies over to my place. Thank God, I still have one half of the parcel left for myself. It will now be easier for me for some time. May God grant you a pleasant rest, full of good people, and for your break to be a memorable one. And I am praying for you, Yosyp, and for your families. May you always stay healthy.

Glory to Jesus Christ!

23/07/2002 Father Ihor, my name is Marichka and I am Taras's daughter. We have received a letter from you for which we are grateful as well as for the book by Charnetsky. I read the whole book and liked it very much. Then I fell on my knees and prayed the prayer from the book. Things are alright with me. I am entering a commerce college. In August, we will be traveling to see daddy. You know, I miss him so much and I want him to be here now, at home, helping me out with everything, supporting me in my attempts to enter college. But God's will is in everything. You and daddy always keep saying: "things are not always going to be like this." I am hoping and asking God to release my daddy as soon as possible. I wish you all the best and may God give you a long life. Serve Him and you will have glory in heaven. We are praying for you because we know that your work is not easy. Grandma sends her regards to you and gives thanks for the letter. With love and respect – our entire family. May God and the Virgin Mary protect you and your whole family.

29/07/2002 It is a nice sunny day today but for some reason, it does not make me happy. On TV they were showing images from that horrible tragedy in Sknyliv.⁸⁰ I could not bear to watch, I felt so sorry for those people who lost their lives. Yesterday, they counted eighty-three bodies but there will certainly be more. Today is a day of mourning across Ukraine. They are looking among us for volunteers to donate blood, those who were never ill with tuberculosis, jaundice, syphilis...I immediately put my name on the list because it cannot be otherwise for me. Though I have never donated blood in my life and have no idea about the consequences, I feel obligated to do what is right. I trust God, I praise Him, and I know that it pleases Him to see this. And I am not the only one who is so generous and kind. A lot of guys are putting their names on the lists to donate blood to the ones who suffered during that air show. Myron is a cool guy who helps me. If not for him, I would not have had my job. Thanks to him, I have already passed on thirty little icons. Furthermore, he tells me various things from time to time. Pray for me, for it is not easy for me. Sometimes, I have no one to talk to and no one who could give me some advice. I want to go home so much and I am so sick and tired of this prison, but may God's will be in everything.

⁸⁰ On July 28, 2002, in Lviv at the Sknyliv airport during an air show that attracted a lot of people, a plane crashed into the crowd of spectators. More than eighty people died on that day.

06/08/2002 Today in the morning, they told us that we are expecting guests – the cast from the masks show.⁸¹ We have to hide all sharp objects. The tension in our cell-block is palpable, but there are a few clowns who bring joy to everyone and in no time one starts to smile. All day long we were walking outside, dressed in uniforms, expecting an omen.⁸² Only around six o'clock did they tell us that we should relax until tomorrow. Well, God is kind and all hope is in Him.

07/08/2002 We relaxed in the morning, but they say that the masks are somewhere in headquarters. There is nothing worth watching on TV, and the guys do not have any good newspapers. I can't wait for you to come and disperse with your powers the sadness that is encroaching on some inmates. At times, it becomes so difficult that you walk up and down the room, thinking and meditating. Since the beginning of the world, there have been poor people and rich people, as well as foolish ones and wise ones, including prisoners of course. Now there are six divisions of special troops in Ukraine, nationalists became farmers, and businessmen are now thinking of where to get petrol for their Mercedes and which villa to visit to get some fresh air. I feel pity for these people, children who gave up their lives for Ukraine. But an independent state is not going to come soon, and it is not easy to make those who are ruling at the moment treat their kind and tender people the right way. I am alright, thank God I am alive. I still have some religious "New Star" newspapers. It will soon be four months since I am locked up here. I wish I could go to church, at least from time to time, at least for confession, because I feel that my nerves were as tightly wound as a spring. Pray for me and for my girls. I am grateful to you for everything and sorry.

14/08/2002 Greetings to you on this feast day, and may you have good health. We are forbidden to lie in bed. It is seen as a horrible violation and for this they may call the warrant officers, write a report, take you upstairs and there, put you on a stretcher or lock you up in the "pit" for fifteen nights and days as if you were a terrible violator. And here after such an offence, all are booted out from the section and the section is locked. This is called international upbringing, because all are punished together and that's why we get angry with one other, for why should the one who did not lie on the bed be punished? And there are morons who are foolish enough to give in to this game, but they are few, and most don't care. Everybody has gotten used to everything here and takes it for granted. Sometimes they can make big problems out of trifling matters, drink so much of your blood, and spoil your nerves to the point of not knowing what to do. In such cases, I tremble like an earthquake. But thank God, somehow all this passes, because I have to tolerate it for the sake of my children. There were so many pompous dates, amnesties, and they did not concern me, although I read in the newspapers that all who were sentenced by the old code are already free. Those passengers who killed Bilozir⁸³ had their term shortened from fifteen to ten years and from twelve to eight years. And for us who have already been sitting here for fourteen to twenty years, everything is without change. The guys are hoping that the doctor will come tomorrow to see the ill. The guys are waiting for you, and may the Lord protect you from every human evil. All the best to you. With respect – Taras.

19/08/2002 Thanks a lot for the newspapers. Myron told me yesterday what you were preaching about and how Divine Liturgy went. Out of hunger, I immediately jumped on the newspapers and even today, I was still reading for half the day because I am seriously lagging behind in that. On TV, the news is not even remotely close to being what it is in the newspapers. In the morning I told them not to do laundry today because it is a feast day, but all in vain. They come up to me and ask for threads, another guy gives them cigarettes and it's off to the races so that he can start doing his laundry. Well, will there ever be some good among these demons?! – I am silent and do my things. I looked through

⁸¹ A popular TV comedy show.

⁸² A kind of police force hired to keep order under special circumstances like the arrival of VIPs, mass protests and demonstrations, etc.

⁸³ The suspicious murder of a well-known Ukrainian singer and songwriter that took place in Lviv in the spring of 2000.

some poems by Zoya Ruzhyn and although I am not an expert, I liked them very much. I am doing alright and am happy for you, and also for Yosyp, and may God give you health and a long life.

26/08/2002 I was on a two-day visit with my dear daughters and mother. I did some relaxing with my children and we had a wonderful conversation on spiritual issues. We read the New Testament together and often prayed. Thank God, He was with us. Everything was very nice, but at the exit from the visiting room, there was an officer and some other cop from the central office. They undressed me almost to utter nakedness. They even cut open the little bag with Charnetsky's soil, touched it, smelled it, but could not find anything. I am grateful to you for everything that you pass on to me and what you are doing for me. I will never be able to pay you back for this – many thanks and, to tell the truth, if not for you, I would not be able to put up with all of this. I mean the inmates and cops. And I manage to find energy in my inner self because I cannot let you down or disappoint you. I do not want you to think differently about me. I had a long talk yesterday with Myron and I will try to do my best. Thank you and may the Lord help you with all your problems, and may life's difficulties bring you joy. With respect – Taras.

02/09/2002 Thank goodness, Myron has gone through his court hearing successfully and will be going home tomorrow. I am very happy for him because he has always been very helpful to me. I remember how we were collecting lists for the Pope and before the elections. Roman also went through the trial with him. You baptized him and I was a witness. You had brought him a new jacket. He has not been going to church lately because he says that he is working on Sundays. Maybe you will recall this guy. You asked me several times about him, inquiring about the one that has been doing time now for twenty years. I am at a loss, do not know what to do, and will stay in touch with you via my countryman. We had a long talk with Myron. He advises me to get out of this cell-block as soon as I can even though it is not so easy. I have hope in God, in good people, and in your prayers. They told me that he has left already, and then, suddenly, I hear a familiar voice. He says that he was looking down at me a couple of times from the first floor but did not want to distract me from my work. He is happy and his face is even glowing. I am rejoicing together with him. He said that he wants to go to your church and to St. George's Cathedral. People have gone through their trial hearings and yet, are still being tortured. But God's will is in everything. It is quiet here now because the head of the cell-block is on vacation but all the orders and instructions regarding me are in effect. He is a spiteful man.

The following poem was recited by my younger daughter in a place where orphans gather on Sundays. She says that she was crying when reciting it along with many other people who were crying as well. I asked her to rewrite it for me. I know that you are collecting such things; maybe you will add it somewhere in your new book. And if not, I am simply asking you to read it because it makes my heart ache and touches my soul. Forgive me, a sinner.

*My life is just a bunch of grief and pain,
My sad destiny is irrigated with tears.
I grow in this world without a dear mother –
I am not as happy as other children are.*

*Does anybody know an orphan's bitter destiny,
How the heart is crying and aching from pain?
How a gulp of water and a slice of bread
Dipped into it are suddenly becoming sweet.*

*My cry today is addressed to people from around the world,
Although we are orphans – we are also children.
Help us people, give us just a drop,
So, that we can survive this harsh hour.⁸⁴*

⁸⁴ Rhyming and rhythm are not preserved.

07/09/2002 In the morning, the gang talked me into playing soccer. I lost so much time, did not do anything, and did not write a letter home. Lunch was delicious today. Although it was pretty small, it was tasty, and thank God for that. An officer paid us a visit before the check-up. He bumped into a mentally ill guy on his way to our room, shouted at him, tried to prove something to him, and that dude probably spoilt his mood. Yesterday, I talked for some time with Myron, asked him how things are in church, about the new deacon, and asked for the number of people that were present. I am interested in all of this. I finished reading the September issue of the "Sower," and there at the end of it, is a mention of the pastor of souls named Ihor who redeems those who say that they have been sentenced unfairly. And the fact that they have had at least ten abortions with their wives, is this fair? I think it was you who wrote this, and I absolutely agree with you. May God give you good health, joy, and have you not begging for anything. I am praying for this and send my thanks to God for you.

11/09/2002 I want to describe to you yesterday's day because I think that I will remember it for a long time. I got up as always, went outside, and started praying. And when the wake-up call sounded, I started running in circles in the area. Suddenly, one inmate stood in front of me as I saw a wooden stick fly towards my head. I managed to duck in time with the stick only scraping my forehead. I asked: "what's the matter?" And he went on beating me. I protected myself with my hands so that he wouldn't smash my head. Then eventually, I pushed him aside in anger. He fell down, but I attacked him. I stood and asked him to come to his senses. But he got up and again attacked me. I had enough. I am really surprised that my hands are not broken, but just covered in blisters and swollen. I could deal with him but I was not angry with him. I knew that he was a bit crazy. This is his fourteenth year here. The other inmates were all standing and gazing. Nobody could understand what was going on. Then he attacked and hit another guy and then again another one. And then came a warrant officer who sits on the roof at night to watch and make sure that no one comes here from freedom. The guys snatched the stick from him because they immediately thought that a horde of cops would arrive at once. I talked to that demon and he brought up our scuffle in the cafeteria. Although I had been warned against him by people who claimed that he was nuts, I got fed up with him at that moment and told him that I would twist his neck one day. Ever since, there has been peace at the table in the cafeteria, but yesterday, it all burst. The head of the cell-block blamed me for everything and took me to the officers' commission at lunch time.

It all ended in a brief conversation and nobody blamed me for anything. On the contrary, they stood up for me when the head of the cell-block called me a democrat. After the commission, I waited outside for one hour because I wanted to thank the people in charge for their justice and fairness. When the boss came out, I came up to him and expressed my gratitude. He did not say anything, only waved his hand at me. The officer said that one has to cooperate with the administration and everything will be alright. But I did not understand what he meant exactly. He asked me if I would like to be a taskmaster and I declined the offer. He said: "do you want to go home?" I responded by saying: "I do, but I do not want to become the taskmaster because I have no peace anyway, and in this case, I would have to deal with people." And at that point, we parted.

I thought that I would be closed up in the "pit" and this would cross out everything for me. I am grateful to God for everything that He is doing for me. I am thankful for not hitting that man although some of the guys laugh at me for this. I am happy to have this tolerance and patience in me, because I have never been a chicken. And maybe all this happened because I had not expected anything of such sort to arise, especially on a Friday when I fast and consume much more "spiritual food." I am grateful to you, first of all, because the authorities' opinion about me did not change without a reason. After being transferred here and from my very first days, I could feel pressure on myself coming from all sides. Anything could have happened if not for you. I cannot let you down, but I said to the officer yesterday that I have reached my boiling point and if something of a similar nature occurs again, I am going to defend myself. It's prison here and the wolves' laws are in effect. I have always tried to act honestly and fairly for as long as I can remember. I have never mocked anyone and have not sought personal comfort. I see everyone as being equal to everyone else. Some tell me that I should behave more aggressively and that I should not feel any pity for the public. I am behaving the way my mother

taught me to behave, and the way I teach my children: do not do evil to anyone. But for some reason, this does not manifest itself in life. There was even a line about this in the newspaper. It reads: “the good you have done today will be forgotten tomorrow. Do good despite this.” (Mother Teresa). Up to this day, I have been doing things in this way. I do not know how things are going to work out. Well, may the Lord’s will be in everything. God is your friend. With respect – Taras.

20/09/2002 Thanks for the newspapers and for not forgetting about me. I sometimes think that this is a show and that everything is happening according to a sequence. If I, a moron, can understand something and be outraged, than what shall be said about those who stand behind all this? Where are those patriots who can raise the morale of the nation? How many years have passed already? The state is independent, and the poor have no welfare. Children are brought up by grandmas and grandpas as their parents are all over the world earning money. Well, what’s the use of speaking about this? You perfectly see and understand everything and I can feel that your fists are also clenched tight. You love your country, your language, you have got everything that a true patriot should have and my heart is aching for our people, but patriots are hard to come by nowadays. I was reading the “Sower” on Wednesday and especially, your work entitled “The Protection of UPA’s⁸⁵ Jubilee.” I liked it a lot. At first, I did not see who had written it but after reading for a while, I sort of felt that I had heard something like this already and then I saw who the author was. May the Lord bless you with excellent health. May He make it possible for you to write more and more often in the way you write: in simple words that makes reading easy.

21/09/2002 Today is a feast day, on which occasion I greet you and want you very much to be healthy, full of joy, kind, and in good standing. May it be easy for you to work with sinful people who will understand and love you. I am currently reading a book entitled “Souls from Purgatory.” Yesterday in the kitchen, I spoke loudly on purpose so that everyone would know that tomorrow is a holy day, and today I see people washing clothes at full speed. There is one athletic guy in the section who is cutting something with scissors, sewing, growling, and getting angry because something is not working out for him. And will there be any good here if we cannot sit properly during morning Service and postpone that work until the next day? And the guys are doing it deliberately. I rebuked some of them in the morning and then gave up because it was all in vain. Bye for now, please pray for me. With respect – Taras.

24/09/2002 I always used to say that there will come a time when our Greek Catholic priest will come to this prison. Initially, I used to go to the Protestants and the Orthodox churches, for there were no other. This gave me something to do. Most of the time, I used to play soccer on Sundays and I had no right to skip a game because we would always put something on the line. Even when I wanted to go to you, the guys talked me out of it, but I still went even when it was raining or there was no ball. I would sit at the back and listen, not understanding everything in the beginning, but I liked the sermons and after church, I felt a kind of relief and was cheered up. I did not want to hurt anyone, to humiliate anyone, or to swear. Then the feeling would pass and everything would go back to its usual self. From time to time, I was coming to you while simultaneously visiting the Protestants in order to compare certain things. I was interested in everything, about the Son and the Mother of God. In one church they say one thing, in another a different thing, and many things were unclear to me.

Then you brought to us George Walter. I saw and heard everything and I later realized that I had seen a living saint, an instrument of God who by his walking among us, made people ponder over their destinies. I have read the New Testament many times. Every time I would see something new, but I did not understand many things. And so I was visiting one Protestant guy who was explaining some things to me. In 1999, I went to confession in our church and I asked you the following question: “if robbers attack my house, steal things; moreover, if one bastard is raping my daughter in front of her parents, what shall the mother or father do in such a situation?” I liked your answer very much: “defend

⁸⁵ *Ukrayinska Povstans'ka Armiya*, i.e. Ukrainian Insurgent Army – the army that defended Ukrainian national interests during World War II.

yourselves!” And the Protestants answered this question by saying that they (the parents) should fall on their knees and pray. And the daughter should be raped in the meantime? Bedlam!

Then I realized that there is no better church in the whole world than my own! I started coming to our church more often, asking certain things, going to confession more often, and I felt relief in my soul. I did not want to sin and to quarrel. I refused to play soccer, and the guys said that they would start the game later, when I came back from church. They said that I was coming back with fresh energy in my body. I developed a kind of habit of going to church on Sundays so much that, when they were announcing some jobs for Sunday, I would look for one hundred reasons not to go to work. I liked your sermons very much and the guys who I know were also eagerly going to church because God was there and He gave them strength, raising their spirits, and there was hope that things are not always going to be like this. You also instilled in us the hope that not everything is lost yet, that somebody still needs us, and that there is a right time for everything. While you were hearing confessions, your friend and assistant Yosyp, talked with us. We asked him questions and he answered them. In those conversations, we, being the ignorant sheep that we are, discovered some rather simple things which we were supposed to know since childhood, but learnt them only in our forties. This is because there was nobody to tell us this when we were younger. Those were wonderful moments and after church we continued our conversations in the section.

Before this imprisonment, I considered myself a Christian, a believer, but it is only here in our church that my eyes have become wide open. I realized a lot of things and learnt how to pray a little bit. Through letters, I am bringing up my children in spiritual fashion and I can already see that it's not in vain. God is helping my children; the kids know why Jesus came to earth and what His will is. On Sundays and feast days, they go to church and I did not do this when I was their age. I do not know what kind of person I will be in freedom if God helps me to get out of here some day, but I will definitely not be able to live the way I used to live prior to 1996. You changed me with your sermons, your life, although at times I wish I could break some people's teeth because you treat them well, share everything with them, and they mock you and call you a “loch.”⁸⁶ But patience is the foundation of our faith in Jesus Christ. I often think to myself, “why didn't I meet such a priest when I was twenty?” Maybe I wouldn't have committed such serious sins and now I am sick because of all that and there is no one from whom I could expect help. I only place my hope in Him whom I caused so much pain, only He can heal me. I cannot even go to church, to confession; I cannot call a priest to ask him to pray for me, and to anoint me with oil. I am left with my own pains and sometimes I think that I am finished. But I always pray and ask God to have mercy on me and forgive me, a sinner. I urge you to pray for me and. “This prayer made in faith will heal the sick; the Lord will restore them to health, and the sins they have committed will be forgiven.” (James 5:15). The sincere prayer of a righteous believer can do a lot. Thank you for everything.

It is as if I am on an island here, the audience is different and I do not understand them. May God give you strength and wisdom, faith, welfare, and joy. Although your work is not easy, there are benefits from priests like you and very big ones at that. I am happy for meeting along my life's path a person like you. Maybe it's too late or maybe I'm just in time. God only knows, not me. I feel bored and sad, but thank God that I am alive, praying for you, for the church, and for my girls. I was writing to my mother, but I did not write a single word to the kids because I am tired of talking and begging. When I scold them a bit they instantly promise to change, but then they immediately forget to do so. Goodbye. With respect for you – Taras.

06/10/2002 We were taken to the cafeteria and I saw you on the stage. It was exactly when Bohdan opened that gate – the curtain. You were talking to him about something, taking newspapers from the bag and putting them on the table. And we were sitting to your right. A couple of times you even looked my way and I waved my hand, but you probably did not notice. I had such a strong desire to come up to you, but I held back my feelings because after that I might have had trouble and some unnecessary talks. And they are useless now. I am grateful to God that I saw you and for a couple of

⁸⁶ pejorative word meaning that someone is weak, incapable of defending himself/herself, usually used by men with a low self-esteem who are trying to raise it by humiliating others.

minutes was observing you. May God give you health. I was lying on my bed for a long time and thinking of you until Myron called me because he had returned from church already. He gave the newspapers to me, a book, and I discussed some things with him. Thank you for everything. I can understand you, but I am afraid of going to the hospital. Maybe when things get really bad, let them do what they want.

The feast of the Protection is in one week. It will be eleven years since you became a priest and the sixtieth anniversary of UPA. But nobody talks and nobody writes about this. And what kind of Ukrainians do we have today, how low have we fallen during these recent years? As always, I am fasting today because it is Friday, and if God provides me with strength, I will fast for a couple more days, praying and asking Jesus Christ to heal me, give me health, and help me get out of here as soon as possible.

Myron said that on Sunday you are going to bring the medallion of the Mother of God from Garabandal that is notorious for healing the sick. Well, may the Lord heal many people, both physically and spiritually. For the seventh month already, I have not been able to go to confession and my nerves are weak and I am swearing too much. Pray for me, because it is so difficult for me that I do not even know how to behave. Good night and may the Lord repay you for me, and I will pray and ask Him for this.

24/10/2002 These days are so nice and warm that it is even pleasant to hang around outside. There is one inmate who is constantly trying to get my attention. For instance, I would be standing and reading, or sewing a little icon as they would come up to me so that I could hear their conversation and start discussing how life was good in the Soviet Union and how the democrats came, followed by relentless swearing. I step aside in silence, and they go on trumpeting even louder saying "these are such nationalists that are only capable of murdering their own wives" (this definitely refers to me). I barely managed to restrain myself but I am grateful to God that I did not go off. If I have an opportunity, I will explain to them one on one that if I hear this one more time, I will smash their heads. I am very sorry about my wife and I feel my sin while for such a scoundrel I would not feel sin. Earth should be cleansed of such people. Normal people will have more fresh air to breathe. Please excuse me for this, but I like to talk myself out of it, to pour my soul out, and then I immediately feel relieved. Take care of yourself and may all good things be with you. With respect – Taras.

01/11/2002 For the third day already, I have been praying the rosary. I decided to organize a kind of novena for myself. It is drizzling outside again. I have given my clothes to one of the inmates to wash, and then I will not have a place to dry them. I pay him for this with tea, lard, and garlic. He is from Transcarpathia; his mother abandoned him and the boy does not receive any aid. That's why he has to do everything for everyone here. This is how he is supporting himself. I would have washed them myself, but he would not let me. Furthermore, he is even getting angry over this. Well then, may the Lord bless him and help him to survive inside these walls. It is eighty-four years today since the independence of Western Ukraine was proclaimed, but they speak very little about this on the news. They just mentioned it briefly and then silence again. Some lie on their beds and sleep. The guys are grumbling, but they will get away with this, while I may not. I therefore never allow myself to lie down, for I know that I am being watched in a special way. It's a pity that we are not let out to church from here. What's the use of me dreaming? But things are not always going to be like this. God is good. Take care of yourself and God will give you the wisdom and strength to overcome everything. Pray for me, a sinner. Best regards to Mr. Yosyp. Thanks for everything.

10/12/2002 Mother came to me in the hospital, and they told her that on that day there were no doctors. She went back home, and then in a couple of hours, she had to clatter all night long back on the train. The main thing is that my mother is not complaining about anyone. On the contrary, she is grateful to God. In fact, she had quite an uncomfortable ride on the train. And now I am reading her letter and cannot hold back my tears, thinking if I can ever repay her for this kindness, for her love to me, a sinner. My lifetime will not suffice to pay her back for everything that she has given to me and

for what she has done to me. My house is on the list of buildings that are going to be demolished, and the children are registered in that house where my wife used to live. And so it turns out that I am being left without a roof above my head, unlucky in this life...

I gave you two pictures which I have cut out from the newspaper, maybe you will like them. I tried to cut them nicely because I like these Cossacks, these Bandera men. They gave their young lives for us, for an independent Ukraine, not thinking about personal comfort. And we are still not recognizing them as national heroes. The whole world has recognized them, and we are living, talking to those who killed them and destroyed us. This is not the way I imagined an independent Ukraine in the 1990's. All earthly blessings to you, true friends and endurance, and may you also have food to properly host those who will come to you for your birthday. I am sincerely rejoicing together with all and wishing you only good things for you and your family. God is your friend. With respect – Taras.

16/12/2002 Today, you are celebrating and I hurry to send you my greetings. I bow my head before you Father, for your love for God and the people, for your sincere heart, for the fact that you are devoting your soul to spiritual work, to associating with us, the inmates. May your difficult work always bear good fruit, and may the Lord reward you with His blessings for many more years of your life. In the morning, I was sticking around and praying, and also for some reason thinking about you. May God give you on this day wonderful friends. May you and all those who are around you be healthy, merry, kind, and have no need for anything. With respect – convict Taras.

19/12/2002 The weather is fine today, it is snowing. In the morning I put a little icon of St. Nicholas on the night-table of one guy, and an icon of Sheptytsky on the table of the other. The boys ate gratefully. They feel happy and are in a good, rejoiced mood. Yulik has stuck his little icon of Sheptytsky on a necklace and is wearing it around his neck. He is walking along the corridor and saying that St. Nicholas has brought him this present. He is shouting all around the cell-block. Yesterday evening each of us received presents. There was soap, a chocolate bar, socks, an orange, a pen, an envelope, and paper. So thanks to the Lord and the people who organized this pleasant surprise for us. But there are some who are not happy with this, because nobody treated them to black tea, and some want to smoke. The majority think that the inmates planned this. I started saying how much clothes, medicine, and X-ray machines the church is supplying us with and that these presents did not come here without the priest being involved. I had a hard time convincing them. They had friendships with priests with whom they would go to pubs, looking for women...And it looks like they are right. But we parted in peace and came to the conclusion that at least ten percent of priests are normal. I even put you as an example and one zek supported me in this. Everyone among the violators who is here is now being transferred to other cell-blocks, even those drunkards who had been sitting in the buria⁸⁷ for one year.

21/12/2002 Thank God, I am alive and writing these words to you from my new cell-block. Yesterday all of a sudden, they took me to the commission and the head said straightforwardly that a priest is asking about me and guarantees that I will be on my best behaviour. He warned me that they will be keeping an eye on me... I am very grateful to you, but it is dangerous to make guarantees on my behalf, for at any moment they can provoke me and then you will hear all the complaints. I will try to avoid putting my tongue wherever, but it is in my nature that I can be silent when things concern me, but when it comes to a friend or other people, I have to stand up for them if I see injustice. I am grateful to God, you Mr. Father, and those people who have been praying for me, a scoundrel. I am grateful that you have not forgotten me during these eight months and support me morally, because I had to go through some difficult things. If not for these prayers, who knows if I would be able to go through these tests and the human anger that was provoking me until the last day. There were various things, but there were also friends, and they were with me to the end. One of them is in church today and he was the one who on December 19 along with me, was convincing others that those presents that we had received were from the Greek Catholic Church and that we should be thankful to God and the priests,

⁸⁷ A slang shortening for “*barak usilennogo rezhima*,” i.e. a barrack of severe regime.

and not to fellow inmates. Folks in prison are ungrateful and complain about democracy. Even the drug addicts who are twenty-two to twenty-four say that it was better under communism. What can he know if he was just a couple of years old at that time? How can one miss communism, are people losing their mind? People do not have an easy life, and it's only going to be worse if such a mood is in peoples' heads, such passiveness. And how can one be silent about this? One can restrain oneself from engaging in such conversations, because the majority perceives them in a negative way. In any case, God is good and things will gradually become better with time, but not soon, because we, Ukrainians, are the ones to blame. Many generations will curse us for the 1990's, for our trust and our decency, because there was a moment to take power into our hands and we lost it, and then in twelve years of independence we did not achieve anything. Children do not see their parents for many years and there is no one to bury the elderly ...Oh, may the Lord give us the strength to endure all of this. I was sticking around before going to bed, so that I can have a good sleep and prayed. I felt somehow so relieved and peaceful inside. Good night and may you also sleep well tonight.

02/01/2003 Thank God, we celebrated the New Year nicely. Yura came into my section with his two guys and they brought with them a piece of cake. I had already made some coffee and was waiting for them with a chocolate bar. Before eating, we asked God's blessing for the upcoming year, for this food, and were thanking God for everything. All these people go to our church and we have some common topics for discussion. We were drinking coffee and standing by the window where fireworks of various colours were bursting into the air. We were sitting like this for a good hour and time passed quickly. We wished happiness to one another. We mentioned you and this on more than one occasion. Today I was praying the rosary for the eighth time, did some exercises, ran, and exercised on the horizontal bar and the parallel bars. Then I was reading religious literature. This is how I am living.

Christ is born!

06/01/2003 In the morning, I made arrangements with Yuriy to grind poppy seeds. We've got a makohin, but no makitra.⁸⁸ There is always a solution though. I then began preparing the food, and Yura went to fetch the parcel, but he did not take with him the kutia and the pastries. It was an order from the officer because he is here tonight. Yura is depressed, but we have everything and it was nice. We had supper for three of us: me, Yura, and his friend Danylo. I still had a candle from last year. We had a good prayer, tried the kutia, drank black tea, and everything was very tasty. The boys were praising our cooking. Nobody bothered us. We were dining in this way for two hours, and then we walked outside for more than an hour, talking, remembering our times in freedom and you, Father. Yura says that when he comes out of prison, he wants to get married and if things work out for him, then he will ask only you to marry him. The guy is reflecting over his life and his thoughts are moving in the right direction. May God let Yura think and do in freedom the way we think here. The boys want to take pictures of our church and in freedom too, because they are going to be set free soon. I gave to each of them a little icon of Sheptytsky. Let them have it as a souvenir of this Christmas Eve supper and about our promise to lead Christian lives once we get out of here. I will be grateful to you for as long as I live. May God bless you and give you the strength to follow Him. Take care of yourself, because we need you and for many more people to follow in your footsteps. Best regards from the folks here. God is your friend and may you be happy during these holidays. All the best to you. With respect – Taras.

27/01/2003 We have prayed together with my kids and mother on a number of occasions. We once prayed the rosary to the Mother of God. I can see that there is understanding in their eyes. I asked them to pray the novena prayer at home. And to you I will honestly say: I am happy with my children, for I see that my letters to them are not in vain, nor my teachings to love their neighbour and to pray for those who have hit them. And they love me and cuddle up to me. But they are in need, are poor, and I

⁸⁸ A makohin is a wooden club in a form of mace used for grinding, mostly poppy seeds for Christmas supper, and a makitra is a large pottery pot in which the seeds are ground with quick circular movements.

cannot help them. I was so happy that they came. We talked nicely, but time passed very quickly. It is so difficult to part with relatives, but I have to, even with tears in everybody's eyes.

31/01/2003 You looked pale to me today, it seemed like you were ill at that moment but your speech to us was great. There was silence and everyone was listening so attentively to you and giving thanks to God. On Wednesday, Oleksiy arrived from the hospital. He is the one who kissed the medallion of the Mother of God from Garabandal and got healed. I was outside, doing my exercises and watching him. He is such a wretched and stooped creature. He hid his hands in the sleeves of his jacket and stands by the entrance to the building. His pants are ripped at the knees, someone would throw a cigarette butt on the ground by the garbage bin and he would pick it up, make his way to the entrance of the building, and smoke it there. He's probably too ashamed of putting cigarette butts into his mouth in the presence of people. I later took that sheet of paper which was written by you about him, came up to him, and spoke with him. I read it to him because he says that he can hardly see, but for some reason, I do not believe him. For one, he was very quick at picking up cigarette bits amidst mountains of garbage that would have made finding them no easy task, but... I told the prison profiteers about the pants, I would buy a pair of pants for him for a few packs of cigarettes but there were none for now. I told Yura and his friend Danylo to come over to me in the evenings, for us to pray the rosary together because they do not know how to. Yura will soon be released. These boys are fine, but when they leave, they will need to be put under surveillance for a little while because they are still young, only thirty. And I pray the rosary because I promised my dear daughters to say a novena, they at home and me here, because we have our hope in God and His Mother. There are many questions surrounding prayer on the rosary. I have read half of the book about Sheptytsky and I like it very much. I give thanks to God for giving you strength, wisdom, and time for such demanding work. I think that any person who will read this book will be able to change his/her view of Metropolitan Andrey. I am grateful to you for everything. May you always be healthy, joyful, kind, and tolerant. My apologies for the handwriting.

I eventually found a pair of pants for Oleksiy, a jacket, gave him a needle, and threads so that he could sew for himself a patch. If tomorrow he goes to church in such clothes, you will have a heart attack. This way, he will look like the rest of us. I myself am ashamed of him, just because he is going to the same church as I. But I was helping him with the pants and jacket, because he had to try them on first. People were running to us and everyone is curious about my dealings with this fellow. And my acquaintances are watching and some say: perhaps you could buy something for us and we would go to church too, or give us some tea. Everybody wants something, but I am just the same beggar as they are, the only thing is that I am looking after myself a bit. Please do not think that I am boasting or trying to show off. I am writing the way it is, because the majority of people here are just scoundrels who think only about themselves and do not consider those whom I am helping to be human. Some say that I am kidding, or that I have been sitting here for too long to be socializing with those dirty people, but I do not think so. Yesterday evening, I again had a conversation with Yuriy regarding prayer on the rosary. He says that at home he will eventually learn. And I have got greater zeal due to his stubbornness, to convince him of learning how to pray the rosary before he leaves. I have finished reading the book entitled "Wonderful Gifts from Metropolitan Andrey," where seventy healings are described. I liked this book very much. And if someone has doubts about anything, then let him pray to the Metropolitan and he will soon understand that he is really a saint. Good night, and may you sleep well tonight, so that you can come to me tomorrow healthy and joyful, because we need you and your advice. We are looking forward to holy Sunday. With respect – Taras.

10/02/2003 My brother received the sacrament of marriage and this rejoices me. God has heard my pleas and also those of my mother and children because it has not been a year since I last wrote to him about a sacramental marriage for the first time. I was not at the wedding, because I was in prison. And one more good piece of news. Yesterday evening, Danylo came to me because I said that I would show him how to pray the rosary. We prayed together for our families, especially because this year has been declared the year of the family. We chatted for nineteen minutes, and then for one hour, took a

stroll outside. This morning, Symeon, the gypsy, came up to me and asked me how to pray the rosary. I showed Yura how to pray the rosary, and then I explained it to the gypsy five or six times. The main thing is that he wants to learn. I make little icons every day, because I also want to give some to Yura. His family is very big. I am bored for some reason. It is nine years already since I have been behind bars and I have another two years and six months ahead of me. In two months time, I will be granted CPR – conditional premature release. Thank you for everything and take care of yourself.

Glory to Jesus Christ!

12/03/2003 We started Lent in a more or less good way. On Monday and Tuesday, I did not eat and I am not watching TV either. The swearing bothers me, but I did not get into fights. I am praying to the Mother of God on the rosary and trying to do and live according to your teachings. On Sunday, I was going to church with some anxiety because some do not like the fact that I am constantly opening my windows. But thank God I was praying, asking Jesus for forgiveness. In a couple of minutes, I was already following the Divine Liturgy. And it was so nice to listen to you, to your wonderful sermon.

Yesterday in the evening, Danylo and I were remembering you, praying as we can for you, for Bishop Ihor Vozniak, and for those priests from the church of the Saints Olha and Elizabeth. It's so good that there is "Arka" and such wonderful articles because we are following everything that is happening in the Church. We have many things to talk about. If a priest believes that after the Divine Liturgy he can live with whomever he wants and however he wants, than he should not be let into the Church because such money-lovers turn people away from religion.

I'm hearing something about the war in Iraq over the radio. People go crazy because their life is too good. It may become even worse for us, because the rich will get richer and the poor will become poorer. Good night and may the Lord protect you from human anger. Take care of yourself, because we need you, those like me, Danylo, Mykola, Vasyl... With respect – Taras.

26/03/2003 On Sunday you were telling us about your problems. Normal people sympathize with you and understand your situation. We remember everything and we will pray for you, although we never stop doing this anyway. It is not easy for you to do your work among these devils, but in fact, there is nothing horrible. As you teach us and have told us many times, one should look at God, not at people and their anger. Take care of yourself and do good, the way you are doing, and evil will disappear on its own. Good night. With respect to you – Taras.

01/04/2003 Today is already Tuesday and may God give you laughter and joy and a problem-free April fool's day. All day yesterday, Pylyp withstood the barking of warrant officers for cigarettes.⁸⁹ The boys are telling him that the priest was correct in his sayings and that he is going to church while discrediting himself and others. It seems like Pylyp is pondering. It's a pity that many like him did not hear this conversation. But what you told him will only be for his own benefit and for that of many others in prison. Some even say that Father Ihor forbade Pylyp from going to church for such misbehaviour. And all the people who I have heard say that he was right. Good night and stay healthy. We are trying to do everything the way you tell us to. Taras.

07/04/2003 Greetings to you Father Ihor on this feast day. I was listening to your sermon yesterday and my soul was rejoicing at the words you said about Metropolitan Andrey. Some people were present at that moment; maybe now they will change their views. I am very grateful to you for everything that you are doing for me, and many thanks for the newspapers. From yesterday's bit, I very much liked one article from the Dolyna newspaper "Svicha." The article's title is "Ukrainian is the best." What can I say? Well done, Oksana Myshchak! May God give her a good destiny. Such women should be many and in the masses, to wake up sleepy folks who will go on to defend their native land. After church, I had a conversation with Omelian. He read me your letter and I can see that he is satisfied with your advice. He accepted you. I am happy and grateful to God for that.

⁸⁹ One of the ways of humiliating prisoners.

12/04/2003 Today is my mother's birthday and I would like her to feel nice on this day. I want the children to love her so that she could be proud of her grandchildren. I am praying and asking for God's grace for my family. I made black tea for the guys and we drank for my mother's sixty-seven years. If you have a chance and some time, please explain Genesis 6 to everyone, and not only me, because there is some misunderstanding of its meaning among us. I hope that your deacon will bring a couple of willow branches for Palm Sunday. Sorry – Taras.

18/04/2003 I am fasting today, as always, and I see that I got used to the rosary because I pray it every day. I just prayed for some time to the Mother of God, and then for a couple of days to either God's Mercy or to some saint. Yesterday, I passed the commission for CPR⁹⁰ and give thanks to God, to you, and all good people that were helping me in this matter and praying for me. I lost so much health in just a couple of minutes! My whole life will not suffice to repay you. I am so grateful to God for having met you, Mr. Father. I only wish I had met such a person earlier, a person who would have changed my life for the better so that my children would now have a mother and I, a wife. But it is too late and I cannot go back in time. Thank you for changing me, because with your help, I learnt to distinguish between white (good) and black (bad). I do not know how things will work out for me in my life and I never promise anything, but if it were required for me to die for you, I would die. These are not just nice words and I am not being a sycophant, just keep in mind that I am trying my best not to let you down.

19/04/2003 I don't recognize myself these days. My head has been aching for the third day already. I can't believe that in a couple of days I will be able to leave this place. Everybody is interested in the amount of time that is left for me and nobody is wondering how much time I have spent here, and that I have sat in prison for nine years before this conviction. Take care of yourself and do not trust our brother. With respect – Taras.

Christ is risen!

30/04/2003 Mr. Father, I am free! I am so happy that you called me in the morning because I know that you are wondering how I got home and how I have been doing over these past few days. I am with God and He is helping me. After our conversation I went to the registry office because I do not have a birth certificate and without this document, nobody will issue a passport for me. There were three women there. I explained my situation to one of them. At first she wanted to get rid of me, but then she changed her mind and asked me to wait. She ran along the corridor to the archives department. I had a new certificate in one hour. I thanked her very much and promised to pray for her and her family. All the women were gazing at me and blinking their eyes at me. And my sister-in-law was surprised because she had the same problem and for one week, was running after that lady. May Tania pray for me, a sinner, because life is not easy for me after that hell. There I had time to read newspapers, watch the news, and here I do not have enough time. We are all praying for you and giving thanks to God.

01/05/2003 When I passed the commission, I had the feeling that I would get out of here soon. I was often praying, reflecting, and in the evenings, I would walk with Danylo and share my thoughts with him. He was reassuring and comforting me. One time I told him that I want to go home very badly, but when I think that I will never see Father Ihor and no longer be present at his Divine Liturgies or hear his teachings, I became scared. How will I be able to live in freedom without our prison church? Will it be as easy and good for me during Divine Liturgy as it is here, in prison? He was laughing and said that I would get used to it soon. And then Palm Sunday came, the last Divine Liturgy for me, because I knew already that the court session was going to be on Wednesday. It was so nice, so interesting to listen to your sermon. You were confessing people, and I thought I would never see you again, would never be in that church, and not be able to protect you from the chameleons that trouble you with their requests. You confessed so many people and you looked very tired. And then you even

⁹⁰ Conditional premature release, i.e. parole.

called me because I was not intending to go to confession. I just wanted to talk to you, ask you something, and tell you that I had passed the commission, but it was already very late.

I was worrying a lot on the day of trial. The prosecutor started saying something about the murder, but the judge stopped him and said that the talk here is not about sentencing, but about liberation. After that, the prosecutor asked me questions and I answered them. Later, he said that he can see by the way I talk that I have understood everything and that he does not mind if the administration grants me conditional premature release. I was standing and praying, tears were flooding my eyes from joy. Thank God, everything went well and after the trial I went to an officer, thanked him, and we had a brief talk. The boys in the cell-block attacked me and congratulated me. I made tea and we partied. I am overridden with great joy!

Somewhere around one o'clock they called seventeen of us and searched us. Then we drank some black tea with candy, and then the officer came in and gave us a farewell speech. I entered freedom ten minutes before five. I went to the nearest intersection; cars were pacing one after the other. I did not understand what was happening to me. I was turning in all directions, not knowing where to go. Everybody looked so strange, rushing somewhere, talking aggressively, as if they could sense by my appearance that I had just been released from prison (so it seems to me). I hopped on a bus and because I had no money with me, showed the driver a paper proving my release from prison. I asked him: "will you take me?" He nodded. I arrived at my destination in no time and again began asking people where such and such house was, and nobody knew. Some homeless people by the church showed me where to go, and in a couple of minutes, I was in front of your door.

I was overjoyed when you, Mr. Father, opened the door. The first words you said were: "thank God you are here already." I fell together with you on my knees, embraced you, and cried, not knowing why I was experiencing such joy. It was something from above; it was really God's grace! When we were praying, when I saw that angel Tetianka, when we were walking with you outside. From everywhere, the children were greeting you so nicely and tenderly, telling you "Glory to Jesus Christ! Glory to Jesus Christ!" I felt a spiritual uplifting and I think that there was something very holy guiding us and protecting us. We were in the church, at Maryanka's and her family with lots of children. Those children are God's angels – wise faces and so modest. They treat you with such respect. I cannot write down on paper everything that I was feeling at that moment! There was nothing left for me to give thanks to the Lord, to you, Mr. Father, and to those good people who, at your request, were praying for me. This day will stay in my memory forever. The short time with you was so wonderful, but impossible to forget. Why is there such poverty in your house? – You are a priest. I remember all the tiny details but I just cannot describe them.

And what a wonderful time I had at St. George's Cathedral, giving thanks to the Lord, His Mother, and all the saints. I prayed in the crypt where Sheptytsky and Slipyj are buried. I even wrote a dedication in the visiting book. It was as if something was directing me and I felt so good. Tania must have told you that I was asking her about everything, tormenting her with my questions. I walked around the church three times, went to the shroud two times, and then, finally, Tetianka and I placed a couple of candles. We prayed and headed toward the exit. We did not want to leave the church, but we were pressed for time. I left with my back towards the door, for I could not get enough of this church's beauty.

I later came up to your church and stood where you saw me when they were carrying out the shroud. I prayed and wished that I could scream: "folks, thank you for praying for me, a murderer who is now standing near you, praying, crying, and asking God's help for you, because I cannot repay anyone." I am no one, but with your help, I am here today and I am thanking Our Heavenly Father for this, and also my spiritual father and all good Christians. It was wonderful although I later had sad thoughts that soon all this will end and the moment of separation will come. I am so grateful to you, because it is your work that brought me here, home, to my children. It was so difficult to part with you, Mr. Father. I got used to seeing you every Sunday and now I am traveling with you to the train station and hardly keeping myself from sobbing. Just like a little child would cry for his daddy, in the same way I am crying for you. Thanks for seeing me off, I am very much grateful to you.

I arrived home without any problems, but the feeling was a bit strange. It was hard to believe that I am already free. Approaching my house, I did not recognize anything. Everything has changed, new buildings have been built all over and my house stands as if in a pit. I took a look at all this and was almost frightened. I entered the front yard, made the sign of the cross, and saw my mother come to me from inside the house. She was shocked and in tears. I entered the house. My sister-in-law came and her children came to me. The older daughter rushed home from work as she learnt about my arrival. Later, the younger one came from church because she had been there with some friends to see the shroud of Christ. We all went together to church to pray. Next day, I went with the kids to bless our Easter basket and only after that I went with Marichka's daughter and niece to the cemetery to the graves of my father, wife, grandmother, grandfather, and friends. I started crying at the grave of my wife, my daughter comforted me, but I could not help but cry. When I look at her picture, I feel such deep pity and such shame before my children. They are also crying, but somehow with God's help, I stopped, prayed, and said that I am sorry.

On Easter Sunday there were lots of people. After church my mother and children put food on the table. We all prayed and sat down to try the blessed eggs and paska.⁹¹ We were sitting and talking behind the table for a good three hours. I mentioned Bandera and his comrades, and how they lived and rested without consuming a drop of vodka. Everyone had fun. It was for the first time in my life that on such a big feast day, I did not drink any alcohol and I did not want to. If God gave me freedom, than He will help me get adjusted to living here so that I can lead a normal Christian life.

On Monday, I went to confession because my nerves were giving in. Everybody takes Communion on their knees, and when they approached me, I took it standing. Some had their mouths wide open. I thanked God that I am again among my people and that God has brought me back to places that are dear to me. All of my prayer intentions are becoming true. It is not a coincidence, it is God's grace, but please keep praying for me because there are so many temptations and sometimes during the day, I even have to reveal the character that I had before going to prison. Please excuse me, but I am still a beast. My head is spinning, but I am grateful to God that my mother and children are here and that there are still good people. With their help, I will try to get adjusted, climb that cliff in order not to sink in this world. Some time ago, it used to be easier and people were kinder, and now there is so much anger, envy, and it will take me a long time to get accustomed to this. Thank you for everything. In prison, tell them to pray for ones like me, because it is not easy here. My regards go out to Bohdan and the officer for his farewell speech. He was talking wisely and correctly so that we would think and be discouraged from coming back. For the holy day, Mr. Father, do not worry about me. My mother and children are praying for you and are thankful for everything that you have done for me. All the best to you, God is your friend. With respect – Taras.

18/08/2004 Not long ago, a priest who serves nearby came up to me. I hardly know him having seen him only a couple of times because his wife works close to me. That priest gave me a huge cross that he had gotten from Italy. I did not want to take it and said: "what did I do to deserve such a gift?" And he said that he heard something about me and about how I am living now after my release. He went on to say that he wants this cross to help me work normally with people, explain to them for whom to vote for, and to be a true Ukrainian until the very end. And so, I had to accept it. My best regards to you from my relatives and friends. Take care of yourself and pray for those like me. With respect and love – Taras.

⁹¹ Ukrainian Easter bread.

MEETING JESUS IN PRISON (Matthew 25: 36)

1. *Rostyslav – has done time in prison for twelve years.* After decades of godless communist rule, the doors of the criminal world opened and through these doors entered preachers of the word of God. They entered not as convicts, but with the intent of spreading the truth. Protestants were the first to break through. They carried out this task through various means, mostly promises of a materialistic wellbeing and gift-giving. The most important thing is that the Bible became available to us.

In order to get some books and to temporarily break free from the sad thoughts and beastly surrounding, I also attended those get-togethers organized by the Protestants. But I would always find myself in contradiction with them. Then people from the Russian Orthodox Church started coming. It was already closer, but I was waiting and asking God to have our native priests from the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC) come to us. It was this Church that was reborn not so long ago, rising up from the underground. It was this church that was persecuted and destroyed by the communists. And the miracle happened, our fathers came. This was when my soul had a real feast! Most certainly, the rebirth of the UGCC was experienced differently in freedom than here, behind bars...A Divine Liturgy only in Ukrainian – our native tongue, an opportunity to go to confession and Holy Communion, were being poured in such heavenly streams into my soul that one wanted to sing with wings growing out from the sides. Without hesitation, I was going for Divine Liturgy, trying to break through, and hitting my feet against the iron door for the guards to let me out so that I would not be late. Different priests were coming to us until Father Ihor started visiting us regularly. He is such a simple man that it seemed as if he was handpicked from among us, outlaws, and then called to become a priest. His visits were looked forward to like God's mercy. His sermons and talks after the liturgy were especially clear. One did not feel like going back to that "mud" afterwards.

As is common among the convicted, attitudes toward the church varied greatly – some could not wait for Father Ihor to come, others did not care, and yet others were hostile, even aggressive. For some people on the other side of the prison wall, the idea of having a priest go to prison was seen as an inconvenience. Once, Father Ihor said that he would no longer be coming to us because the outside world was restless. This was a real tragedy! It was hard to see inmates cry – murderers, thieves, drug addicts...Again a window of clean and bright light was being closed to us. Such anticipation and eagerness of a Sunday that was once so desirable turned into sadness, into cold autumn mists. It was a special kind of test. Folks were wondering, questioning, writing and asking to have that priest back. Many petitions and letters were written and God heard our prayers and pleas. Father Ihor was appointed chaplain of our prison.

May the Lord help Him in everything.

2. Glory to Jesus Christ!

01/10/2000 Dear Mr. Father! As you know, I am a complete orphan and in freedom I do not have anyone. I would like to ask you; maybe you know such people who would be able to support me morally with their letters. You may know what it is like to receive letters from dear people and from relatives who I do not have. And therefore, at the present time, it is difficult for me to serve my sentence.

I am in a maximum security section of the prison and it is here that I have come to know God. At first, it was difficult to make that choice and something was hampering me because I used to have authority in the criminal world. I was leading a criminal life, considered myself a respectful person with whom everybody deals with, and I was proud of this. In various prisons, I spent twenty-one years of imprisoned life without seeing anything good before me but barbed wire, high fences, and guard hounds. Knowing life in freedom, I am just begging everyone to think over their deeds! God exists and He sees everything, all our sins do not pass without punishment, and sooner or later we will have to pay for them. I am already crying over mine. Yes, I used to think that to lead a loose life was the best thing in the world. And I saw only the same things before me – money, vodka, other men's wives...Believe me, money is not everything. Therefore, before anything else, I want to address the youth with these

words: “think twice before you do something and choose the right path for yourself in life.” Not long ago, I could see in freedom everything that was happening in this world and I am amazed that God can put up with all of this. How many people are there who still go to church for others to see them going there but in fact, do not believe in God. They drink, seek entertainment during Lent, and organize various parties.

Now I would like to share with you the things that happened to me after you baptized me. I could not recognize myself; I felt so relieved inside. I started having completely different views on my life. Before that I was living with devilish thoughts, and now I read the Bible every day for one hour, every morning and evening, praying for all believers and non-believers, for our priests, and also for Ukraine. Long ago, old women were telling me that God exists in this world, but I could not believe them because the ruling power forbade everything. You described it very nicely in your little book entitled “Why We Love Bandera.”

You know, there are some people who laugh at me for praying, but I can understand them. Their parents bring them bags, and that’s why they laugh at me giving thanks to God for this slice of bread and bowl of prison soup, for the fact that I go to bed and wake up healthy the next morning. In other words, I have changed for the better and I am grateful for this to God and to you personally. Lately, I cannot rid myself of one thought, namely, whether I could go to the monastery after I am freed from this prison and spend the rest of my years serving God. I am lonely and I would like to repent for my sins before God. I would very much like to hear your advice on this matter and the correct approach that needs to be adopted in order to have a faithful life. I am sincerely grateful to you for having read my letter. May God give you long years of life.

With respect – Roman.

05/11/2000 I give thanks to God and to you personally, for the attention you have given me, for your determination to prove to us with your sermons that we are not the ones we pretend to be. I do not know about the others, but for me every Sunday is a new step in my life. I am discovering something new about myself personally. After your sermon, my soul feels so relieved that I just cannot understand why it is so. I know one thing: that prayer is a strong mysterious power through which I communicate with God, stay with Him, and that it is something that one cannot describe in words. You understand what prison is like and what kind of life is here. I am trying to abide by God’s laws even though it is very difficult. I pray in the morning and evening, although at lunch time I sometimes forget. That’s why I want to go to confession sometime at the end of the year. Thank God, everything is going fine. Frankly, I did not think that everything would change so much in my life in such a place.

Soon I will have served half of my sentence and it seems like I have only just come here. Sometimes I think about what to do next, whether or not I will be able to control myself. This is because I am going into nothingness, I have no relatives, no close friends, and for some reason, I no longer want to partake in my old ways of living, for soon I will turn forty, and some people who are sitting here could be my children. Some people here are twenty years my junior and some even more. They are surprised that I became a felon at such an old age. Some are wondering, asking questions, and some do not care. There are eleven of us in the section. Out of all of us, I am the eldest. We always have something to talk about, but not a single time would anyone change the subject to talk about the future, let alone God. Everybody lives one day at a time with the one that is today, and nobody is interested in what will come next. I once used to have such a life and this made me happy. And to start from scratch is very difficult. Maybe you will suggest something, for you have more experience. You talk to a lot of people while I am here with the same people as myself.

May God bless you.

12/11/2000 Dear Father Ihor, I am sincerely thankful to the Lord and to you personally for your reply to my letter. I myself was of the same opinion that it is better to go to the monastery and give the last years of my life serving God. Prayer is now for me something extraordinary. I am teaching myself to pray both in the morning and before going to bed. Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night and also pray, but this happens only when I am uneasy about something. It is difficult to carry on for

the whole day. On Saturday, we talked a lot and disputed with one another, because the subject of our talk was the concert. I responded by saying that I only know that it will involve kids, but nothing else. I then added that if it is interesting, you may also go. I also said that there will first be Divine Liturgy and only then will the concert follow. Their facial expressions immediately changed and they switched the subject, quickly forgetting about the previous one. Twelve people came for Divine Liturgy, all were standing around me. I, for one, was pleased to see them seeking God, but I also understand them. It is difficult for them to overcome themselves, but let them see what it is like, because I know for sure that not one of them has ever been to church. They all have only the same old things on their minds – drugs, lechery... I look at them and feel such pity because they are young enough to be my children and will not make it if they continue with their old ways. I tell them this straight in their eyes and they chuckle. This is how I am currently living.

I cannot share with you my personal thoughts regarding the concert. It was for the first time in Ukraine that children performed in prison. It is evening already and I can still see those children in front of me, thinking about how happy they are because God is with them. They love Him, and He loves them. Indeed, it is just difficult to compare myself (a child) with them. I felt like crying and leaving, but I restrained myself and went on listening. Now I am trying to remember the face of each child; there is reason for envy. As I was looking at the children, it seemed to me that nothing is impossible for them. They were looking at us without knowing probably who we are. I do not know, but for some reason it seemed to me that few of them believed that we are doing this out of our own will and that some have come to know God for the first time. Many people know us as thieves, murderers, and so on. But they cannot take a glimpse into the soul of each of us and find out what was happening there during the concert. I felt like coming up and embracing each of them, expressing my own gratitude, but this is forbidden. You saw for yourself how we were separated by tables from the stage. We, inmates, were separated from you, the free. And maybe the kids saw all this. I can remember how one girl looked at me with her eyes in such a way that made me feel embarrassed to the point that I lowered my head, feeling my guilt before her eyes which were full of tears. But each of them had their own thoughts about today's day, in the same way as us. I wish I could know at least somebody's impression or opinion. I, of course, am grateful to you and God for understanding me and helping me with what you can. That is why I will always be praying for you. With respect for you – Roman.

I understand that you have little time and here I come falling on your head. It is the first time that I have met a person like you. I want to thank you for the book, a very good one at that, because there is a lot to learn from it. In other words, there are things to learn and things to take for myself. Sometimes I sit and ponder over my life and believe me, there is little good in it. How many times was I punished by God for my sins and did not think anything about it? What will come next when the years go by? Sometimes I have various thoughts go through my head. If one is to look at me from aside, I am just a child, because sometimes I get such thoughts that surprise even me, and sometimes it happens vice versa. Life moves on; soon it will be New Year's and that's why I want to ask you for five postcards if it won't be too difficult. With respect – Roman.

I want to confess to you openly that exactly on December 15, 2000, I became sure that God is in this world and that everything that has happened, He judged the right way. I was taken to the disciplinary commission, before that I made the sign of the cross and prayed the "Our Father." And what would you expect, they only warned me. After that I came to my bed and again prayed the "Our Father" and the prayer of grace. I felt so relieved; I felt like never before, as if I was born again into God's world. Now I can tell everyone and anyone that God is in this world. I do not want to say that I became so good, but I am trying to improve in everything. Every time before and after having a meal, I give thanks to God for everything that He gives me to eat. When there is heaviness in my soul, I ask: "God, help me endure this moment so that I do not go off and do not sin against You." Even the head of the cell-block has noticed me and said: "you are becoming bizarre." I replied that God's will is in this. He only blinked at me and I did not quite get what was so strange about what I had said. In any case, we had a brief talk. He asked me if I am not from a sect and I said no, and told him that every Sunday, I attend Divine Liturgy of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church.

For some reason, I often think about your suggestion that it's better not to relax with women. I know that, because every time I end up in prison, it's because of them. All of them want to live well-off and for that one needs money. This is where the trouble starts. Also, you wrote that you learnt to lead a beastly way of life: the harder it gets, the stronger you become. Well, the same beastly life can be found here (in prison), with the one who is the most cunning going on to survive. Father Ihor, it is almost impossible to loosen up in such a place, if you relax, they eat you up. Life here is constantly tense and uptight. They used to be humans long ago and things are quite different now. Here, before saying something, you have to think twice, because your words can get you into even greater trouble. Thank you for finding the time to read my letter. May the Lord bless you with good health, a strong spirit, and may you feel happy, for He is on your side! With respect for you – Roman.

3. 30/03/2003 *Omelian, born in 1966.* I lived a horrible life marked by fighting, drinking, smoking, sleeping around with girls, and injections. It did not take long for my health to seriously deteriorate. Many times I stayed alive only by a miracle. I have been sitting behind bars for ten years already, but have always believed in God. All earthly gods came with power, and Jesus came with love and conquered. So it was on Sunday when Taras suggested that I attend the Nativity scene play. Children were showing scenes from the lives of Joseph and Mary – Our Heavenly Queen. I was standing and crying, giving thanks to those kids who had come here, to the so-called special contingent, and so openly, so sincerely. From the bottom of their hearts they softened our souls.

I asked God to give them great happiness and health and for their lives and those of their children to steer clear of a prison like this. I was sincerely grateful to their parents who allowed their children to come to such a cauldron of evil so that they could dissolve it with their smiles, looks, and words...May the Lord grant you, our spiritual pastor, health and victory over evil, and may your sheep be uncountable. Somewhere deep in my soul, I am also grateful to the administration of this section that allows you to carry out your difficult work here. Still, not all prisoners came to see the play. My friend is fifty and has been sitting in prison for twenty-seven years. He has grown so used to the barbed wire and suddenly, little children. The heart can barely cope with this. How difficult it is for us to overcome in this world the pain of separation from a beloved wife, parents, and children. Our hearts are aching and our souls feel pain after such a loss. But how much more difficult it will be for us to endure the loss of Jesus on Judgement Day. Let's not forget that each of us has the right to salvation given to us by Christ.

4. The Nativity Scene Play in Prison

The Divine Liturgy was served by Father Ihor and we, the children, were singing along. After that we staged the play. The prisoners were crying out of joy that they had not been forgotten. The children gave them a moment of happiness. Frankly, we performed in many places but, for some reason, it was easiest here, in prison. It seemed like these people are almost doomed because they have made too many mistakes in their lives. But instead, they were the ones who either cried or laughed like children. They had their ears pricked up, following each movement, each breath... I could feel that we were listened to not only with ears but also with the soul. Funny enough, but we did not want to leave that place...Anastasiya.

5. * I have the opportunity to make a comparison: what people pray for in prison and what they pray for in freedom. The convicted always hand in a whole heap of cards. This is what the inmates are asking from God:⁹²

For the health of all priests of Ukraine; for the Pope and George, the pilgrim; for their enemies and prison authorities; for all those who are in orphanages and boarding schools; for all those who do not forget us and keep on praying for us; for all to whom we caused calamity and grief; for all the ill convicts; for peace and love among people, for justice; for all prisoners, for their freedom; for the health of our priest and deacon who are not abandoning us; for all Ukrainians and Christians of the

⁹² Hereafter with an asterisk (*), the text of the author (Father Ihor Tsar) is marked.

world; for the health of orphans and homeless people all over the world; for a healthy and wise nation; for all those who are suffering for the truth in Ukraine; for the health of my fiancée, may the Lord help her give up taking drugs; for the conversion of sinners and their repentance; for those who are struggling for a better future for Ukraine; for the youth of Ukraine, for good and honest people; for all Ukrainian women who are compelled to go abroad; for the conversion of Russia; for all the poor of Ukraine and the world; for Nicholas who brought presents to us; for love; for reconciliation between parents and children; for the people who are expecting God's grace; for all who perished in prisons; for those whom we caused death; for the peace of the souls of those who died from the artificial famine; for those who gave their lives for the independence of Ukraine and whose graves are unknown, for whom the bells did not toll; for our deceased relatives, neighbours and those who were working with us. Give peace, Lord, to their souls and forgive them, for not all of them have repented. Do not punish us, our children and grandchildren, for our little sins.

Of course, before that, they wrote down their names and then all of the abovementioned intentions were said aloud. The greatest number of prayer requests was for all the priests of Ukraine. And now, let us take a look at prayer requests in a church outside of prison. Everywhere, the only thing people care about is me, me, and me, and pray for only themselves and their families. They never ask to pray for the orphans, imprisoned, their enemies, for Ukraine, and for the whole world. They never pray for the priests who most of all, need help and prayer to be able to carry their heavy cross. In order to better understand the hard work of priests, put your children in their place. And here we see the difference between the murderers, thieves, drug addicts, and those who live in freedom. How awful it is when a human being is in church daily but his/her heart remains loveless – empty! May everyone make the necessary conclusions from this and ponder over their lives, deaths, and eternity.

6. * 11/04/1999 On Palm Sunday, there were lots of people in the prison church and a little miracle took place. I said that I will confess all those who are confessing for the first time without them needing to stand in line, and the folks like everything that is without queue, and so they got trapped. And suddenly, one after another, murderers proceeded to go to confession. In prison, to step over the threshold of the Church is a great event, and to queue for confession is already a miracle. I came home and with tears in my eyes, started thanking God for the souls. At the same time, I cannot understand why God is using for His glory the services of me, a sinful man.

7. * On the feast of the Epiphany, we bless a huge vessel with water. One inmate pours water from the vessel to everyone else that comes up, makes the sign of the cross, and drinks holy water from their mug. They come up in single file, like geese in a row. Everything is done in peace and silence. I look at them and think: maybe I should record this on video and show it to all the beasts living in freedom, let them see how murderers, thieves, and drug addicts behave on the feast of the Epiphany...

8. * On Pentecost in 2000, a man that was in a gang, did horrible things, and killed four people, came up to me for confession. He has been imprisoned for nineteen years already. I gave him the sign of forgiveness. He kissed the cross and then suddenly, started kissing my hands, sobbing in tears, and even trembled from repentance. How can it be that God forgave him such sins? All this was happening in front of 150 inmates who came for Divine Liturgy. I was amazed at those horrible sins and this rare pity and repentance. This is how a human is trying to save himself/herself from hell!

Here, perhaps some would like to say something foolish to which I will say something different. How many people in this world are not sitting in prison but are not baptized, live without a church marriage, are not confessed, do not go to church, and do not think about Judgement Day? Others mock religion, praise their mammon, go to fortune tellers, and serve Satan. They drink, smoke, take drugs, have abortions, do not pay salaries to people, do harm to the poor and orphans, and do not cure the ill...

“These, then, will be sent off to eternal punishment, but the righteous will go to eternal life.” (Matthew 25: 46). “It is better for you to enter life without a hand than to keep both hands and go off to hell, to the fire that never goes out.” (Mark 9: 44). “There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

(Matthew 25: 30). A proud man violently makes his way to hell while a thief with his repentance opens the door to heaven.

9. Oleksander, born in 1938. In prison, I graduated from university as a part-time student from the faculty of journalism and then from the faculty of applied art, specializing in advertisement and painting. In this respect, I was not wasting time, even behind bars. I spent forty years in various penitentiaries, thirty-five of them in prisons of special regime as a dangerous recidivist. I did not commit heavy crimes: minor robberies, resistance to the authorities when they were on duty, and aggravated assault. For this I was sentenced to death, but then things got better... Twice I was married: in 1970 – in freedom, and in 1987 – in prison with a part-time student. I am not afraid of anyone or anything except God, but I am afraid of dying behind bars – an unpleasant feeling as it seems to me. This I do not wish upon anyone.

I have great respect for believers; they are a different sort of people in all respects. At the same time, I cannot understand why believers are sometimes enemies among themselves. This depresses me a great deal because believers are not a parliament. If I, a criminal, an utter sinner, understand this, why then do believers themselves not understand this? This is so simple and clear – in unity is our strength. This is why I so seldom go to church even though it is a pleasure for me to be in church. One feels something extraordinary both around oneself and in the air. But people... Why do they come to church so sad? Why do they come only with their grief, to light a candle, or only to pray? I think that God would like to see us not only aggrieved but also in joy. Wouldn't He? God forgives us all of our sins if we ask Him sincerely.

The year was 2001. It seems like it was yesterday... This event touched the hearts of millions of people, and not only Ukrainians. I am one of those who watched this historic trip of the Pope on TV with particular emotion. What did this visit of the Holy Father give to me personally? To be brief, it changed me and my views on life. I have been without parents ever since early childhood. At the age of five, I pastured my neighbours' cows. The neighbours would lock me up in the cellar for three nights and days for the slightest misdeed. They would not give me anything to eat. In the cellar, apart from canned cucumbers and cabbage, there was nothing. I ate whatever I could and drank pickle juice. The taste of candy was not known to me. I later found a way of experiencing its taste. On Sundays, the neighbours would take me to church. I was five and I started to pickpocket. While kissing the crucifix, I would steal kopecks or even bills from the tray. And when the salesman in the village shop asked me where I got the money for candy, I would answer him, looking straight into his eyes, that God had given it to me. At the age of seven, I found myself in a children's home. As I became older, I started robbing shops. That way I had not only candy but also cigarettes and wine. In the children's home, boys and girls were true friends to each other. I treated them to what I had and taught my peers how to steal. Those were times of hunger. On top of that, we were being robbed by both our principal and our teachers. People were treating us with disgust. The disgusting "child from a home" was like the hit of a whip.

In 1958, I found myself in prison for the first time, for the forgery of icons (I made them look as if they were ancient). When I was released, I heard for the first time the demeaning word "prisoner." I started hating people, and at the same time, I was ready to give up my life for them if I had an opportunity to do so. This opportunity did not come, and in the meantime, the hatred was growing. No, no, to kill a human? I cannot and I have no right to do this, but my disgust towards people remained until the arrival of the Pope in Lviv.

I was watching this holy old man on TV and my heart was aching from tumult, I was short of breath, and tears were filling my eyes. I was not ashamed of my tears, because all the inmates beside me were also touched. To tell you the truth, I did not expect such a sincere welcoming of the Holy Father by Lviv's residents. And what wonderful youth we have! Thank you boys and girls for the fact that with your openness, you made my heart melt and it started loving you and all people. You must know: I love you! Thanks for waking up love in me. After this I will not be able to steal. My release day is quickly approaching. If I previously did not know how to get adjusted to living in freedom, than now I do know. I do not have any relatives, nor will I have a roof above my head. The only thing I can

do is paint. I can paint icons, landscapes, and portraits. This is enough to earn one's living. But once you are freed from prison without a penny and no roof above your head, it becomes complicated. The door to a senior's home is also closed for me. They are afraid of a convict. What shall I do then? With respect – Oleksander.

Holy Days⁹³

May the holy days rise like a star,
If God is in your heart.
Then you are above the ground,
And you do not know pain and hardship.
I praise You indeed,
With my open repentance.

I will disgrace somebody's hatred,
With love, faithfulness, and life.
May fury find forgiveness,
May evil be crushed around the world,
And may from God's sign,
The sun shine in the misty darkness.

Faith

The rays break through the clouds
And grass grows through the concrete.
Among people: he who forgets God,
Has his soul overgrown with weeds.
If you are wandering in doubt,
Listen to your heartbeat.
There, God is protecting you, –
He is your healer.

Road to God

I was walking to You God for so long, –
Did not believe that You exist...
But it is no good to live without faith, –
A plant fades without water.
Forgive me my earthly sins,
Help me to change my existence,
And may Love, Hope, Faith
Return me back to life.

For What and Why?

What did You create the human for?
What did You give him a mind for?
For what in the hour of trouble,
Did you save Your creation?
Why do You forgive all sins?
Why did Jesus suffer for everyone?

Why do You accept everything in silence,
Why haven't You bridled everyone?
What will come next – that I do not know,
But everything has its ending.
Therefore, all humanity – I guess so,
Will wear a crown of thorns...

10. 2001. We, the prisoners of a maximum security correctional facility, are addressing the Universal Patriarch, John Paul II, Pope of Rome, with a request to visit us. We are people with broken destinies, from children's homes, orphans, and that's why we want to use this rare opportunity to ask you to pray with us, to ask you for the forgiveness of our sins and to receive from you God's blessing for a better destiny in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Signed by 850 convicts.

* This invitation was signed by imprisoned Ukrainians, Russians, Jews, Poles, Hungarians, and Gypsies, representatives of other nationalities, Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and Muslims.

11. Glory to Jesus Christ!

21/11/2001 First of all, thank you Father for the parcel, the papers, and the spiritual teaching. I have one more request for you. I will soon be released and have a problem regarding my clothes because it is winter outside. Once again, I express my gratitude to you for your care to us. You know, every time I listen to you, I become a new person. I perceive many things in a different way than before. Your words opened my eyes to many things. Soon I will be in freedom. I do not know how things will work out, but I am going to try my best in order not to get stuck in this muck again. I turned thirty in October, and when I look back, there is only darkness. I even have nothing pleasant to recollect. I have not seen anything in my life (except for prison and evil) since the age of sixteen. And that's why I thank you first of all for everything. Every day, I pray and ask the Lord to help me resist the

⁹³ All the verses here and after are translated without preservation of rhythm or rhyme.

temptations which Satan is already preparing for me when I am free. May the Lord bless you and may He protect you from all evil. With great respect for you – Vasyl.

12. * In the fall of 1997, I was “taken away” during a sermon for speaking too strictly and harshly. After the Divine Liturgy, a man from Volyn who was doing time for stealing a sheaf of flax came up to me and said: “Father, do not say such sermons, because they will deprive us of you.”

13. * In 1998, a convicted man came up to me. He attended the liturgies and with sadness said to me: “Father, Easter is in one week and I won’t be in church because I will be free already. However hard it is to be in prison, I do not want to go because it feels so easy and so good to stand during the Divine Liturgy that I forget about everything in the world. And at home I was torturing myself at church and standing as if someone had bound stones to my feet, so much that I could not wait for the liturgy to come to an end.” I laughed because this was the first time in my life that I heard someone say that he does not want to leave prison.

14. * Bohdan has an interesting life story. He was born in 1958 and has been doing time already for twenty-one years for three murders. He has one child from his first wife, two from the second, and five children from his third wife! During his first thirteen year sentence, he sat in the “pit” for eight years for fighting. He is a respectful criminal figure but I want to say everything about him because men like him are rare. He is a man of justice. Time and God’s grace did their work on Bohdan. On Easter 2000, Bohdan confessed for the first time in his life. I was extremely happy about that. Later, he also brought some of his friends to confession. On two or three occasions, Bohdan was again ready to do something bad and wanted to remove some people from this world but he restrained himself from doing this in order not to let the priest down. I am sure that it was Holy Communion that changed his heart and is saving him from committing crimes. Once, a friend came to Bohdan and said that from time to time, he passes out and does not know what to do about it. He was probably under some kind of spell. Bohdan said to him: “there, on the altar, the priest always leaves holy water. Go and wash yourself with it.” He did exactly that and a miracle happened – he got healed. When they were telling me about this, I started laughing because it was just water. See what true faith in God can do!

15. * In 2002 on the feast of the Protection, 120 prisoners came for liturgy and I gave them to kiss the miraculous medallion of the Mother of God from Garabandal.

1. Oleksiy, born in 1957. “I have been in prison for thirteen years already. Once, after an injury, I had a huge wound on my right thigh. No matter what I did to it, nothing worked. The wound would constantly bleed and fester. Doctors said that such a thing is incurable. Still, I did not lose hope and continued to pray. Following Divine Liturgy on the feast of the Protection in 2002, the priest gave me to kiss the miraculous medallion of the Mother of God from Garabandal. I kissed it with faith – and after eight years of incurable disease my leg got cured.”

2. “As a result of an explosion of a welding machine, I had a corneal spot in my left eye. For such wounds there is no surgery. And after five years of illness, I kissed the miraculous medallion and soon my wound dissolved and disappeared. I am sending my thanks to the Holy Mother for these miraculous healings.”

3. Zenoviy, born in 1951. I have been in prison for two years. In the summer of 2002, I burnt my leg and eczema began, and from September of that same year, there were boils on my neck and head. Some of them, especially those at the back of my head, were extremely painful. When I applied the icon of Charnetsky to them, the pain eased, but the boils reappeared on my shoulders and legs. I treated them with expensive ointments but they were of no help. It got to a point where I could no longer walk but I still found a way of going to Divine Liturgy to pray. On the feast of the Protection, the priest gave us to kiss the miraculous medallion of the Mother of God from Garabandal. After that, before I even realized, I became completely healthy – the eczema and the boils disappeared. I feel great joy in my soul after such a miraculous healing.”

16. * For two years, Danylo, a drug addict, attended our church. Together with Taras, he helped me a lot and became a practicing Christian, learning how to pray the rosary. He was a nice and wonderful man who dreamed of beginning a new life after his release. But once he started having pain in his leg. He was taken to hospital. There, he died, two months shy of being released from prison. He was thirty-two. When I learnt about his death, I started howling like a wolf. I felt so much grief for Danylo, but I also had joy in my heart because he died in God's grace. After the death of each of my parishioners-prisoners, I celebrate a separate Divine Liturgy for them and in this way, I honestly fulfil my priestly duty before their souls.

17. * I once met an old lady going from church who said: "nothing will come out of this prisoner who has sat for twenty-one years in prison for murder." And I answered her: "on Sunday, after Divine Liturgy in prison, I approached my bus stop and there, a paralyzed girl was sitting in a wheelchair. The marshroutka⁹⁴ came – everybody was hurrying to get on, nobody was paying attention to the poor disabled girl who may as well have been late for her train. I rushed forward and said: "save a seat for a sick person." In reply I heard a female roar that said: "I am sick too," and nobody would even budge to help. I forcefully put the wheelchair with the girl into the marshroutka, hardly being able to shut the door behind me. And then I stepped back and screamed: "these are not people but beasts, prisoners would not do that."

And this is what I heard from the mother of a blind girl. They were standing at a bus stop when the marshroutka arrived, and suddenly the driver saw that the girl was blind, meaning that she has the right for a free ride. He pressed on the gas pedal and the only thing that was left of him was a cloud of dust. Or, sometimes, the drivers like to play beastly pop music⁹⁵ and they do not care that the people are being transported as if in hell. Such a driver would never be called a prisoner nor will he find himself in prison for that. Moreover, he may be living quite a good life but in that other world he will certainly have to bear responsibility for all this.

18. * At the very beginning of my ministry in prison, I experienced the following strange cases. One man came up to me and said: "Father, I have been punished with twelve years and I am not guilty at all." I felt pity for that man; what an injustice, but then I asked him: "how many abortions did your wife have?" The answer was twelve! The same day another one came up to me and said that he was convicted for ten years, and also for no reason. I asked him about abortion, and the answer was ten. Both they and I were shocked.

19. *Yakym, a gypsy, born in 1968.* Many years ago, I was betrayed by a friend with whom I was bringing stolen money from abroad. I stabbed him with a knife and was sentenced to fourteen years of incarceration. I later escaped from prison but was caught in a trap where a night watchman was waiting for me. When they opened fire, I fell on the ground before the first bullet flew above me. God alone knows how this could have happened. One of the guards pressed a gun against my head and the other was screaming: "shoot, what are you waiting for?" At that moment, I was thinking about death and suddenly in my thoughts I started repenting for my sins and asking God for forgiveness. Before two seconds even passed, the first one said: "wait, we may kill the wrong one." And only then did I realize how merciful God is, that out of love for a human being He forgives a sinner when the latter is repenting, even if only in his thoughts.

There were many similar cases with me. I was ill with tuberculosis. While staying in bed, I saw those who were dying in front of my eyes. It was a horrible sight, to see how young people from the ages of eighteen to forty were dying. Doctors could not save me and said that I would live for four more months. I was lying in my bed, waiting for my time to come. I saw how young boys were leaving

⁹⁴ A minibus that has a particular route and picks up people along the way like a public taxi.

⁹⁵ Quite often the drivers in marshroutkas play primitive criminal, pop or wedding songs in Russian, as if it is an additional price added to the fee (1hryvna) and the lack of space inside. During rush hour, the passengers can be pressed to each other like sardines in a can.

my life. And I called to “our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ” (Titus 2: 13) with a prayer for rescue. Lord, I am young and I know that You love me. Because of Your love for me, You suffer. If You need my soul, may Your will be satisfied.

At night I distinctly saw Jesus in my dreams, by the entrance to church with a cross. “God is Spirit, and only by the power of his Spirit can people worship him as he really is.” (John 4: 24). He was in white vestments. His eyes were looking at me as if He wanted something from me. In my dream, He told me these four words three times and I woke up. In the morning, I woke up and went for a walk, pondering over my dream. Without receiving any medical attention, Jesus brought me back to a normal, new life.

I was reborn because that was God’s will. Now I have a healthy spirit, body, and a clear mind. I gave up smoking after confession because Jesus is in my heart. Now my lungs are alright. I am grateful to the Lord, our Jesus Christ, for making me, a prisoner, free. Thank you Lord for expressing Your love and grace to those who are calling Your name.

Father, on the feast of the Protection, I removed a burden from myself and felt relieved inside. I started breathing freely thanks to the Holy Virgin Mary from Garabandal.

20. Glory to Jesus Christ!

Symeon, a gypsy, born in 1951. My mother is originally from Hungary. She is retired and is eighty-six. My father passed away. I have six children. I worked in factories or construction sites. Then I was compelled to go and steal because there was no job for me, and so I ended up in prison. After a hangover, I stole a bag at a train station which resulted in another sentence lasting one year and a half. I regret this. I am spending six years in prison for the second time. I took this term on myself instead of my wife because I have many children and I did not want her to do time. Let the mother be with her children at home. In prison, I fell ill and was in bed at the central hospital because the illness was really getting to me. They performed haemorrhoid surgery, and my kidneys were infected. I therefore started asking you Father, to help me with my medicine. I started visiting church because you like to speak the truth and help people who are in need, because you believe and feel the pleas of the people. I am very grateful to you for everything. May the Lord give you a clear sky, happiness, health, and long years of life.

* I can remember when Symeon approached me after the Divine Liturgy and asked if I had bought the medicine for the surgery, for otherwise...I said yes; I had brought it with me. He wanted to thank me but tears flooded his eyes. He did not expect that someone in such a difficult hour would, without profit, do him some good. Never, for as long as I live, will I forget these tears and that gratitude. He is a true gypsy, a hard-worker. For six years I helped him with food, shoes, medicine, and with whatever else I could. Symeon learnt to pray the rosary, he never missed a liturgy and his face was shining during the liturgy. He brought many gypsies to confession, and once he even translated a confession because there was one guy who could not speak Ukrainian at all. Symeon will become a gypsy saint. After his release, I gave him some money for the train and we parted with the hope of meeting in heaven.

21. Glory to Jesus Christ!

22/04/2002 Holy Father, I served in Afghanistan from 1979 to 1981 and now I have committed a horrible crime for which I am repenting and am constantly begging God to forgive me. I am addressing you for help because I do not have any relatives or close friends. I am ill with tuberculosis and dystrophy. At the moment, I weigh thirty-nine kilograms, and my height is 165 centimetres. I still have to serve a lot of time behind bars – six years and eight months. But I can feel by the state of my health that I will probably not survive until the end of my sentence. I feel that I am losing weight all the time and am constantly hungry. Help me please, with a parcel of bread, for the sake of Christ, the Saviour. I will be praying for you and for all the sinful people of this world. With great respect for you – God’s servant, Vitaliy.

22. Glory to Jesus Christ!

September 2002. I am very happy that we have you Father. We wait for you as if it were freedom. Although I still have four years before my release, this does not trouble me anymore. This time I am finally, for the first time in my forty-five years, getting closer to people and to God. In my previous life, I was not interested in anything except vodka and I was always hampered by one problem: where to have a nap after a night of heavy drinking, and then to get drunk all over again. In most likelihood, if someone would have asked me to go to church, I would have replied: “free load me with one litre of vodka and then I will go.” But now in my old age, I have finally realized to whom we stand accountable and I do not want to serve Satan anymore. I have a job here in the blacksmith’s workshop; I have you and I do not need anything else. I read during my spare time. At least I will have rest here from all those hellish years in my life. We are almost peers with you but because of that vodka, I look like I am sixty years old, and when people try to guess my age, they never give me less. Believe me, I cannot even write properly. I asked a friend to help me out by writing while I dictate to him. I am writing this from the bottom of my heart, with love and faith in God and with trust in you – Yevstakhiy.

12/11/2002 Father Ihor! I want to tell you about one incident from my life, one that is varied and surprisingly sinful. After spending eight years in various penitentiaries, I began to understand the essence of my existence and to analyze every deed of mine. In freedom, because of my everyday worries, we have no time to think about this, forget about God, our Creator, plunging headfirst into the whirlpool of sinfulness. A couple of days ago, I received aid from you for which I am again saying my deepest thanks. Something in my soul was prompting me to give it out and I did as my heart told me to do. When I was giving things out, I felt such relief and joy, I forgot that I am in a prison, and that tomorrow I will need what I have just distributed among my fellow inmates. I remembered your teaching – do good to people and the Lord will pay you back a hundredfold. I shared the aid with those who I knew cannot and will not be able to pay me back in the future. I saw their eyes, some full of gratitude, others full of deceit and slyness, and the rest envious, full of disrespect. But I was on top of God’s grace. I was smiling and was full of joy, thanking God that I, His sinful slave, can live like a human being, and not as an animal. I realized that it is not too late to return to God, to fulfil His commandments. What a pity that I did not meet you earlier, twenty years ago. Then my life would have been completely different, because my parents were also forcefully deported from the Peremysl area as nationally conscious Ukrainians. I am grateful to you, Father Ihor, for in your sermons you always remind us that we are also God’s children and that the first one to go to heaven was a thief/prisoner. With respect to you – convicted Yevstakhiy.

23. * A handsome young man came up to me and said: “Father, if you only knew how difficult it was for me to approach you. Previously, I was doing time for robbery. I was released, met a beautiful girl, fell in love with her, and wanted to marry her. Besides, my fiancée was pregnant, and maybe by now she has had an abortion. When her mother heard that I had already been convicted, she did her best to put me in prison again. That horrible woman goes to church every Sunday and calls herself a Christian. How can I be together with such people in one church?” I could hardly comfort him as I told him: “Judas was an apostle and what did he do? Still, because of him, we should not reject Christianity because we have a pattern with the other eleven apostles who gave up their lives for Christ and became saints.” In the same way, that old woman, who with her deeds is serving Satan, has no right to be called a Christian and because of her you need not abandon the true Church. Read through the “Lives of the Saints” and every day you will find thousands of people who you can use as models in your own life. Understand that things are not always going to be like this and that the world is not without kind people. Destiny will smile upon you one day!”

24. Borys, born in 1957. My parents are poor peasants. My mother was ill and did not work anywhere, and my father drank, bringing constant unrest and fighting to the household. From early childhood, trying to follow in my father’s footsteps, I was already serving Satan with my actions. I did poorly in school, smoked and swore, and at the age of seventeen, I started drinking together with my

parents. In 1976, during a drunken fight, I broke the law and killed my dad with an axe. I was released in 1982 but did not make the right decisions and in 1984, I stabbed a person during a drunken dispute. I was sentenced to two more years. After my release, I was leading a lecherous life and in 1990, I ended up in prison once again on charges of state robbery and lechery with an under aged girl. I was sentenced to nine more years. In prison, during a scuffle, I killed one prisoner and got one more year. I was released but shortly thereafter, became ill with tuberculosis dispensary. Nonetheless, I again cut a man with a knife and this led to another six year sentence. Since 1998, I have regularly gone to church. For the first time in my life, I went to confession and received the body and blood of Jesus Christ. During confession, I talked only about those things that were already known to everyone from the court trial and remained silent about the rest of my sins. After this I saw a dream at night and then I heard a voice: "how come brother Borys, you only talked about those things that are known to everyone, and the things that are only known to me you did not mention? Immediately go to the priest and tell him everything about your life and then do whatever he will order you to do. If you fulfil this and will ask, it will be given to you." I woke up at once. It was dark in the section and I realized that it was a dream. On Sunday, I came up to the priest and confessed for the second time. Now I felt lighter in my soul than I did after the first confession. I understood that I had found something which I had been looking for in my life – the road to Our God Jesus Christ. May God bless me. My grandma was very religious and her prayers from the other world are probably saving me. Dear brothers and sisters, please pray for the forgiveness of my sins before God, for my sins are numerous.

Father Ihor, dear friend of God! Thank you for the medicine which has been saving me for so many years. Since you are here, I would also like to thank you for the food parcels and for your kindness to me. May the Lord repay you for your painstaking and difficult work. With sincere respect for you – Borys and my Guardian Angel.

25. August 2002. Father! Thank you for the favour, for the love, for having baptized me and for rescuing me for so long from bad deeds. I love you very much because you are my teacher. Through you I came to know the love of God. I am going home and I do not know how my life will work out, but in September, I am definitely going to come to you and find you. May the Lord love you and give you the strength to come to us in prison and celebrate the Divine Liturgy with us. Thanks to you and to your authorities from us all. Mykhail – servant of the Church and your pupil.

21/10/2002 Father Ihor, I want to write to you about a person with whom I came to you to church and with whom I have been sharing for two years already my bread and everything else that I have. Borys is from a poor family and he practically did not have a childhood. Since the age of fifteen, he cannot find a way to get out of prison. He's been doing time for twenty-six years already. After each release, he wanted to start a new life but every time there would be some people who made him take a knife into his hands.

I want to tell you the truth about him. He is a very hardworking person. Everything that you give to him, he distributes among the sick and poor. They constitute 70% of the inmates in prison. He cannot say no to anyone and he won't pass a person without helping him. He already supplied two people with shoes from that collection of shoes that you had given him. He is reading books and newspapers and giving them to others. He is seriously ill with tuberculosis but is still fasting and repenting for his sins to the point that for us inmates, it is hard to look at. This Friday, they brought him bread from you and he divided it among the prisoners and then together with me, he prayed for you and for some unknown person. I beg you Father, take care of him, for I do not want to lose a person who really believes in God, acts according to the Bible, and teaches me wisdom. I am very grateful to him for that. Father, please bring me a pair of glasses and a rosary, and also, please say the Divine Liturgy for our authorities because if to think carefully, they are the ones who are feeding and clothing us. Your son in Christ – Mykhail.

I want to thank you Father for the attention you have given me. For the first time since I am in prison, God sent me His grace through you and made me joyful. Thanks a lot for the warmth of your heart, for having baptized me and given me the understanding of the meaning of life in this valley of

tears; for the joy that you have given me, and the four more persons that through me, were also led to baptism. Father, I am trying to explain to people the Divine Liturgy and the importance of confession. Some understand, others giggle. Some are too ashamed of going to church even though they believe in God. I want to give you a little gift for your warmth, grace, kindness, and for the very fact that you exist and bring light and salvation to us inmates. These are little handcuffs. If you stick your finger in them, you won't get it out without a key! I just wanted to do something nice for you from the bottom of my good heart that is believing and trusting you and wishing you all the best. Mykhail.

26. *Wilhelm, born in 1940.* I ended up in the tuberculosis prison hospital in Kherson and I was constantly praying to God. One convict mocked me for making the sign of cross. He joked and parodied this. Soon after, a circular saw cut his fingers off. In my prayers, I was asking for mercy for myself, for you, Father Ihor, for the people who faithfully go to church, and for good Ukrainian priests. I took these prayers from the prayer-book which you had given me in 1997. Since that time, it has always been by my side. The Lord heard my prayers. After a modification in the Criminal Code of Ukraine, I am eligible to be released. I have spent eight years of my sentence here already, accused of stealing a hefty amount – 180 hryvnas! And I was sentenced to twelve years. My daughter, who was falsely testifying against me, passed away. That was how she got punished because she was actually the one who entered the store herself. Nothing can be turned back because God's will is in everything. I am very grateful to God for his kindness, grace, and salvation. * He came back alive from Kherson and immediately asked for confession. He was crying out of joy when he saw me. His father was German.

27. * One man told me that when he was drunk, he killed his own nine-year old daughter. He is suffering and repenting for this offence. He was sentenced to nine years. Often people tell me: “what a horror! How could you give forgiveness to such a criminal?” And I will tell you this: “and how many people have abortions? – With pincers they tear from the womb and kill their unborn and unbaptized children. They do not even feel any remorse for this! Nobody takes them to prison and nobody calls them prisoners, moreover, some of them even live a lavish life, sometimes being unable to count the number of abortions they have had. On Judgement Day, they will have to look into the eyes of the deceased children and then suffer bitterly for this after death, while the prisoners who are in this world are repenting and greatly suffering for their sins.”

28. *Souleyman, born in 1952 in Baku.* We lived in poverty, my parents worked at a brick factory and they divorced shortly after marriage. My dad married another woman and my sister and I stayed with our mother. It was difficult for her with both of us. We were growing up. I wanted to dress nicely like my friends did, but we could not afford to. Nobody was paying attention to me. My dad wanted me to leave my mom and come live with him. I did not do this because I loved her.

It all began with thefts in the school cafeteria, changing rooms, and the staff room. I started to demand money from the weakest, went out on the street and was stripping people of their valuables. My mom understood everything but she could not do anything. I was behind bars five times already. Altogether, I have sat in prison for nineteen years.

I want to say right away that I have always believed in God but only for myself, and it seemed to me that that was enough. It turned out that I was very much mistaken. I now have a fellow countryman who came here from another prison and who works in the cafeteria. I would go visit him every Sunday and talk with him when I noticed that Divine Liturgy was being celebrated. I unintentionally heard one sermon, then a second, third, and then I started going to church. At first I liked the priest, as a person. He was conducting Service in such a simple and natural way that I was looking forward to next Sunday. Once, when everybody was going for confession, I went too, and I was begging for the priest to confess me even though I am a Muslim. They explained to me that there is one God and that I have to be baptized. After the baptism, I became united with God in Holy Communion and I sensed that God had entered my heart. I previously had no idea that a soul can be cleansed; I felt very relieved. Words cannot describe such a state. Tears of joy flooded my face and for the first time in life, I felt happy!

If previously someone did malevolence to me, I would swear at that person. Now the priest advised me to forgive that person and to pray to God, so that He would lead this person in the right way. I could not accept what the priest was saying – to forgive and wish good. With time I had to do it this way. A person was playing tricks on me and I was praying for him. One time he came up to me and asked for forgiveness. We are now friends. Similar things happened many times.

I will describe one incident which I remember very well. I was almost barefoot, had no shoes to wear, and my feet were freezing. I came to church. The priest looked at my shoes and said to cantor Yosyp: “take a picture of his feet.” This was done so that the Father could have an approximate idea of my shoe size. For a long time, I could not grasp why he took a picture of my feet until I came next Sunday for Divine Liturgy. They called me and then they put warm boots on my feet; they were made as if for me and were my exact size. I had a friend who was a father of five. He was soon going to be released and was constantly asking me to give those boots to him. I did as he asked after wearing them for one month. Sometime after that, one inmate in the barrack asked me about my boots. I told him that I had given them away to someone. After the check-up, he gave me another pair of shoes. Nothing is free here (it’s a give and take policy). On many occasions, I spoke with the priest. He was giving me various suggestions and not only to me, but to everyone who was addressing him with questions. In one conversation the priest said: “the main thing is that you continue to pray, ask God, and He will definitely help you.” On February 24, 2001, I was praying for a whole hour on my knees where Divine Liturgy is usually celebrated. I was pardoned!

29. * A respectful and quite elderly man once said to me that a great misfortune occurred in his life because he was imprisoned for six years. Some scoundrels got him into a car accident and because they were wealthy and influential people, they turned the whole story upside down to make him sound like the perpetrator. Why such an injustice? I asked him when he confessed for the last time. He had to go as far back as 1953 after which he committed heavy sins. I told him: “it is God’s grace that you found yourself here, for at last you have had a confession after so many years. Otherwise you would have gone to hell.” He agreed with what I had told him and after that he complained no more.

30. Glory to Jesus Christ!

27/02/2002 Father Ihor, I was put into a tuberculosis hospital. I am grateful to you for your grace and for helping the inmates. Faith in God changes a human; he/she becomes different and makes changes from his/her previous life. And so am I grateful to you for everything that you have done for me. You made me understand that there is a way out. Through faith I became different and now I am coming to God. Father, with this I conclude my brief letter. If you can, please buy me my medicine. Your sinful Edmund.

31. * Some ask me if I am not afraid of catching tuberculosis, but God’s will is in everything. I often give Communion to the seriously ill and then with the same little spoon, I eat Communion. I give myself up to God’s will and may the Lord do with me what He wants, the way He pleases. Many Christians in the world are praying: “Our Father may “my” will be done.” Namely, I want to be healthy, be full of food and loaded; I want to have a three-storey house and one child. But very few can show heroism and say: “Our Father, may “Your” will be done.” Thank you for everything and I will accept everything with gratitude: joy and grief, health and grave illness, life and death.” This is what I call true Christian freedom. I have observed that the biggest miracles happen when a human being forsakes his/her will and agrees with everything that God sends.

32. * In December of 1999, a man came up to me, in his mid-seventies I would say. I was about to address him with the words “dear old man,” but restrained myself from doing so and asked: “how old are you?” He said that in January he will turn fifty and that he has been sitting in prison for thirty years already! His parents died and he lived with some relatives who caused him great agony and kept him in a cellar. His brother-in-law was caught stealing, and they accused him of doing it. He was sentenced to ten years. Soon after, his brother-in-law raped a girl and the blame fell on him because he

had already done time. This resulted in ten more years. And for the third time, he was at a wedding where all the drunken men were fighting. He hit one man who fell onto an iron rod that was sticking out from the ground. The man was instantly killed and he was sentenced to ten more years. And even in prison folks make fun of him, whoever pleases to. Bitter is his destiny.

33. *Oleh, born in 1960.* My parents divorced and my brother and I moved in with our mother. Soon I went to live with my dad. I went to school and my dad was teaching me photography and how to repair cars. In the spring of 1978, I met a girl who later became my wife. My father and stepmother were extremely opposed to idea of marriage, but I did not listen to them and still married this girl. My wife gave birth to a son and a daughter. There were good times and bad times. But the goodness that was in our relationship came to an end in 1987 when my wife betrayed me. I did not divorce her because I felt sorry for the kids. In 1993, I left my wife because to live with her intolerable character and my mother-in-law's music became unbearable.

Until 1996, I travelled from village to village photographing schoolchildren. I hardly took any pictures because I met with a widowed woman and a mother of two who liked to drink. I could not resist. This is how I ended up in the docket. I was accused of fraud. In 1999, I again began to photograph in another region of Ukraine. In one village, I was persecuted by the local big bosses who were sent of course, by competing photographers. I took a heavy beating after which the doctors had to fix up my face. I was warned against photographing in that area but I did not listen and on one beautiful day, I was punished for this disobedience. On the train they stole all of my negatives (all twenty-six of them) which I was going to develop and print. And then the whole fiasco began: threats, scandals, telephone calls, and again, prison. But I am enduring all this as much as I can, although it is very bitter inside my soul. Writing poetry helps me. Sometimes I write just for myself, sometimes convicted folks ask me to write poems for their relatives. I began to visit the Greek Catholic Church. Because of Father Ihor Tsar and his prayers and good teaching, I am not giving up, instead, I am writing for people and about people: about love and betrayal, about prison and nature, and what is most important, about my conversation with God Himself.

Linden tree

An old linden tree by the house,
And its flower is golden.
What pleasure it is to breathe in the scents,
And to listen to the magic rustle.

I am looking at the linden tree from the window,
From the native house of my parents.
I am looking at how the sun rises in the morning,
And see its reflection in the mirror of ponds.

And on the hill there is a wonderful garden,
Branches burdened with fruits. –
Oh, how the honey nectar makes me drunk...
Beauty, beauty, beauty is all around!

There, not far from church,
Is an old mill that has been here for one hundred years.
Wherever you look, you see a crane's nest,
When will it all come again?

Earthly Paradise

The river is silently flowing,
 Behind the houses, it goes into the world.
 The stars are glancing into the water,
 And the blossoms of roses become silver.

There stands the weeping willow,
 She has let her plaits down onto the water.
 Where do you bring your water, river?
 Please tell me, please do, where, where?

And in the grove, behind the field,
 A nightingale was singing.
 One time out of joy, another out of grief,
 He was telling someone about something...

Beneath the clouds in the sky,
 A skylark has sung his song,
 Meanwhile a wonderful swan in the lake,
 Was looking for a companion.

34. * An old man named Hnat was sitting in prison for killing his own wife. His children abandoned him. Only his ninety year-old mother came to visit him. Hnat never missed a single Divine Liturgy and I helped him in every possible way. When he was sincerely confessing his sins and repenting for them – one cannot express it in words. After Communion he always prayed so much that his face glowed. He worried that he would not be released before his mother's death. But it happened vice versa. His mother came to visit him and Hnat died in her hands. His children refused to take their dead father and some distant relative had to take him. I am so sorry that I was not informed of his death, for I would have buried old Hnat with pleasure since he died in God's grace. What a harsh and unmerciful world – Christ forgives people and the children would not forgive their father. I wonder if these children are so sinless to have judged their father in such a way.

35. * *Franek, born in 1956, convicted twice for machinations.* His father was a Polish officer during the war and his mother a Ukrainian from Volyn. They lived quite well, had their own house, and a car. Franek's mother was constantly scrambling to get to her homeland. Once they saw a cartoon in the newspaper: a thick sausage was hanging on a fence and underneath, a dog that wasn't even looking at it because life in the Soviet Union was so good. This cartoon influenced the parents so much that they left for Volyn. As soon as they crossed the border, they were instantly deprived of everything they had. The father started to protest and was imprisoned. The mother stayed with the six kids and was begging the authorities to let her go back to Poland, but in the KGB the answer was: "there is no way back, only forward – to Siberia." Then she started begging to have her husband released and did not say anything about her belongings. They released him and settled the family in a barrack.

36. 14/07/2001 I was born in 1964 into a family of workers. My father was Russian and my mother was Ukrainian. My dad was a heavy drinker and beat my mother, not caring at all about my upbringing. Whenever I would get a low grade in school, he did not think much, but would just take anything that was at hand and beat me with that object. Until the third grade, I studied quite well but even then I was already stealing cigarettes from my father and would secretly smoke. I have always been a lefty and when in the fifth grade my teacher called me to the blackboard, I took the chalk with my left hand. She stared at me in awe and said: "take it with your right hand." I refused, for I could not write with that hand. Then she gave me a failing grade and called my dad to school. When he read my grade-book, he took an adze and spun it on my body with such power that I could not sit for a week. The teacher was happy about that because I became a robot, whatever they told me, I would do it just to

avoid the drunken hand of my father. After that I started hating the teacher who by the way, was our class-master. And in order to get revenge on her, I stopped listening to her. After that I was expelled from school and moved to a boarding school, to repeat the fifth grade. There it was not good for me because I was not used to the closed life. I started skipping all the classes. They decided that I should be sent to a psychiatric hospital. I stayed there for some time and was then checked out, but I still had to study. There was no place for me at school, nor was I suitable for boarding school. They decided that I would get home schooling. A teacher who knew me well came to my home and in this way, I barely finished seven classes.

Then I went to study in an educational industrial complex to become a bricklayer and installer. I studied well and went for my first co-op experience. Then I served in the army. When I came home, I met my old friends and everyone began drinking on the occasion of our reunion. This lasted for a couple of months. After this my mother decided to send me for some medical tests. The court decision was to send me for half a year to a narcotics rehabilitation centre. There I could not endure the tortures and mockery, for initially, they injected me with sulfazin, after which for one night and day you either sweat like crazy or are feverishly hot and then for a week, you drag your leg behind you as if it were broken. I could still undergo these wonder pills, but when they started giving me zinc in the afternoon (this provocation was called a procedure), I growled louder than ever. At the same time they were giving me vodka, so to say, to make me feel aversion to it. When I asked the doctor if a person at the age of twenty can become an alcoholic, he laughed, and to the question: "are we guinea pigs?" – He did not say anything. I chose a moment when they took us to load laundry and then escaped. It did not matter where I went, just as far away as possible so not to be caught. I got recruited to Ural to a wood cutting area and there, in Siberia, people only work and drink, for they have got nowhere to go and see nothing but wood.

Upon my arrival back home, I met two drinking buddies who had robbed a shop that night. They invited me to drink with them. I came home and smashed a mirror. My mom called for a cruiser. The cops arrived. I was lying unconscious and in my pocket was a chocolate bar from the shop that had been robbed. I was questioned and in order not to betray my friends, I took all the accusations on myself – they sentenced me to eleven years! During all these years my buddies did not even bother to visit me. I never received a single loaf of bread from them for sitting here instead of them.

Once I heard that a priest was coming to the prison. I went to church even though I am not baptized, not feeling quite right about this. But I was burning with a desire to get baptized. I learnt the "Our Father" by heart, prepared myself, and on July 9th, 1997, I was baptized. Before that I knew practically nothing about God because my mother was a communist and my father was agnostic. I remember in my childhood how grandma would go to church, but I was not allowed to go with her. Therefore, I did not know a single prayer. After my baptism, tears were begging to flow from my eyes but I was too ashamed because of the priest and all that is happening in prison. I was compelled to restrain myself. When the priest was reading a prayer, I felt a strange relief. When he started anointing my hands and ears, it felt as if I was being charged with a new kind of oxygen. After this happiness I started visiting church regularly, reading spiritual literature, and learning prayers from a prayer-book that had been given to me by my godfather, cantor Yosyp.

The priest, Father Ihor, taught me a lot of things. With his help, I have read more spiritual literature here than during all the years of my existence in a drunken state. I underline the word "existence," because I did not live but existed. Some say that when they get to prison they begin to exist, and in freedom they lived. I would put it differently, that without God, be it in prison or in freedom, there is no life but sheer existence.

Once, Father Ihor brought to us a pilgrim, George from America, who has been wandering around the world for thirty years already. The clothes on this holy man were bizarre. He was wearing clogs, if one can say so, because the soles were made from car tires, cut out from the wheels and bound with belts. His coat was patched from pieces of old jeans and was tied up with a rope. He was holding a Bible in one hand and an icon of the Virgin Mary in the other. He also had with him a cross with the crucifix. The main thing is not the clothes. What's much more important is the love for God, joy, and fullness with the Holy Spirit. With a smile on his face, he told us how he has been greeted, how he

travels, and how he was blessed by the Pope. The meeting was unforgettable and interesting. Frankly, I was envious of him, because there was so much brightness, love, and holiness shining from him. This meeting added a lot of light to my dark life.

Father Ihor was telling us about a student who had been saying the Jesus prayer 3000 times. At first I thought that he must have been doing nothing but praying for the whole day. The next day, I decided to try praying “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” I was not counting but I was praying until lunch time and did not notice how the time passed. In 1998, I was fasting in the prison and did not eat for one week. It seemed like I had to fall down because my body was not getting the necessary nutrients, but I felt like... it is impossible to express it in words. It was such an income of spiritual energy that I was not walking, but flying! Later I told the priest and he advised me not to do this because it was Lent in prison. Once Lent begins, I go outside early in the morning, say prayers on the rosary three times, and then recite the prayers and Psalms which I know by heart. When I do this, the sky is always clear.

Now I can openly say that I am a happy man. I cannot describe or explain this state. Only the heart and soul can understand this. I am begging for only one thing: that sinners repent. As Father Ihor says: “let’s live in such way that we could be together in heaven.” I wish I had such a teacher in my childhood. God’s plans are strange, so plenty are His gifts, so strong is His love, so warm is His grace! With great respect and Christian love, a sinful servant of God – Serhiy.

37. Glory to Jesus Christ!

01/09/2002 *Yakiv, born in 1978*. In my childhood, I remember being obedient and honest and for this I was loved. I had a sister and a brother. Life was full of joy. When my father died, a stepfather appeared. He was a drunkard and started beating my mom. Our house turned into hell. Nobody among the children wanted to make friends with me because my parents were drunkards. We would often go into hiding at our neighbours for a couple of days. Once I seriously beat up my stepfather. He grabbed a knife and attacked me, but I snatched the knife from him and struck him. The police arrived and took me away. In court nobody would listen to me and my mother was also against me.

In prison, I read the Bible for the first time and my eyes lit up. I felt how my life was changing and it was becoming easier to live with God, albeit in prison. I received peace and happiness in my soul and all the hatred disappeared. And when I confessed to you Father, I felt such joy that others started paying attention to me, asking me: “why did you always use to be so sad, and now you have such a happy face?” I did not know what was going on with me.

Father, remember how I was coming to you, saying that I was going to have surgery? I went and they told me that there is no guarantee that I was going to live. I refused to have this surgery and started praying to Sheptytsky. I was there in the hospital for two weeks, prayed without stopping, and then I was sent back to prison. I continued to pray and the thing disappeared from my ear. I realized that it was God’s power and the grace of Metropolitan Andrey that helped me. The doctor was surprised and called me to have a look. I told him that I have not been on any treatment or medication and that I only cleaned the wound with cotton balls because nobody visits me. I stayed alone with God and my brothers in faith because with them, I pray and go to church and to you, Father. We are very grateful to you that you do not forget us even though we are not alone but with God.

I am not able to go to church every Sunday because I have a job in the blacksmith’s workshop and sometimes they take us for work. But I pray and ask God to forgive me. I do not want to be a violator because it is in God’s will to use me in such way. Soon my sentence will come to an end. I’ve got nowhere to go and I do not want to go back to the village – to that devilish house. I do not know where I will settle and my friends will not continue being friends with me because I do not drink or smoke. Father, when I get out of here, I will tell you a lot. I see in you a real teacher.

01/12/2002 “Come to me, all you who are tired from carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest.” (Matthew 11: 28). To read the Holy Scriptures is the biggest grace that God gives us. I do not know why I did not come to know the word of God earlier. Now I have someone to live for. It is much easier to sit in prison with God and my life has gotten better. My faith in God is saving me from the

darkness which once enveloped me. I survived three fatal car accidents and I am surprised at the miracles that allowed me to stay alive. I understand only now that God was with me. Father, I cannot come tomorrow for Divine Liturgy – it is not by my will, sorry. I will be praying for you every day and I am asking God to lead more people to salvation. Father, not too long ago I dreamt that I was serving you during liturgy in freedom with a young girl standing beside me. You came up to me and said: “Yakiv, you are going to be happy with her.” But I do not know her. Then she embraced me and said her name – Ira. I woke up. In a couple of days the head of the cell-block said: “in February I will be releasing you.” But where shall I go? I’ve got no one in freedom and I will have a hard time looking for housing. Father, thanks so much for not forgetting us – your imprisoned brothers. We are praying for you. May the Lord bless you abundantly.

38. * David came to me. He was fifty-one and was terminally ill. I could see that he used to be a healthy man but after spending twenty years in different prisons, all that was left of him was skin and bones. He felt that he would die soon. I did everything to support him in the difficult hour of his fight for the soul. David had to deal with a priest for the first time in his life, but he was following all of my suggestions. He was praying and confessing during each liturgy. We saw each other for the last time when he was already unable to move his feet. Then I told him: “David, do not fear death, you are with God and in heaven; the Lord will give you a better life.” His eyes sparkled with hope, we parted, and the next day David died...

39. 20/09/2002 *Nazar*. For twenty years I have been sitting in prisons and I am only forty-one – pure nonsense. In between prison, I managed to get married three times. Now I am most bothered by the fact that I did not baptize my son. He is already eighteen and I do not even know if he has already been baptized or not. I saw him for the last time when he was five. I always believed that God exists but I was just sinning too much. Once the police stopped me and I had stolen things on my person: a VCR and some gold. In two nights and days, they were able to locate the owners of these valuables. Prison was awaiting me but that night, when my cell-mate was already sleeping, I stood on my knees and said: “God, have mercy on me, Holy Spirit, inhabit me and help me to become free. I promise you Lord that I will stop taking drugs and I will never take them into my hands!” The next day, a miracle happened: I was released. It was only God’s power that set me free. A year and a half passed. Again I took drugs and was imprisoned.

I was eventually released, came home, and saw the grounded poppy seeds all ready, just waiting for me like a temptation. Instead of taking them and burning them, I did the opposite. At the train station, police officers came up to me to check my belongings. I threw my bag and started running. I broke the skull of one policeman with an armature. I was caught. I received eight years of imprisonment and there was no one to blame because I created the trouble for myself by myself. Not only did I lead a sinful life, but I also did not keep my promise before God. When I was brought to jail, I went to liturgy and took Holy Communion and repented for my sins. I now feel like a happy human being because I am not alone. The Lord is always with me and I am with Him. I felt His power and grace.

I am grateful to God for sending such a person like Father Ihor to prison. He is a genuine man and the most important thing is that he conducts wonderful liturgies and tells us various stories from his own life to pull us closer to doing good deeds. May the Virgin Mary protect him from all calamity.

40. * In June of 2002, I heard over the radio that in one European country, 80% of the population voted in favour of legalizing abortion. I told the boys about this during liturgy and we decided to vote on this too. I asked them who is against abortion, and all 100 inmates raised their hands. Thus, criminals who have been sitting in a maximum security prison for ten, fifteen, twenty years – thieves, drug addicts, and murderers, have higher awareness and more love and mercy than the wild materialistic world. So “comrades,” how then is it going to be on Judgment Day? It’s very simple: “many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.” (Matthew 19: 30).

41. Hryhoriy. I was born in a small village. After finishing school, I entered a technical college. In class, I met a girl and forgot about school. After a month, I was expelled from the college. I was left on the street where I met some guys, good guys I thought. The guys agreed to pay me money and took away my documents. Life became good. They were giving me money, big bucks to spend even though there was no work. During conversations, they asked me if I knew anything about firearms and the types that I was familiar with. In other words, I became a man of arms in their team. We took part in various jobs but I never participated directly in them. My work was tied to guaranteeing the functioning of weapons. Everything went smoothly. I liked the job and I felt like a hero. But horror is never dormant.

In those regions, few people knew me and I was nowhere lit,⁹⁶ and therefore they ordered me to eliminate one person. They showed me the man in a picture, and then in real life near a cafe. I agreed without hesitating because there was no way for me to refuse. A completely unknown guy gave me a ride to the crime scene. After waiting in the car for approximately one hour, my victim appeared. I was not thinking about anything, apart from how to finish all this as quickly as possible. I came up close to him and shot him twice in the heart. To be extra certain, I took a third shot to the man's head. He collapsed and people started running to him. I got into the same car, drove for 500 metres, and got out. I didn't even ask for the driver's name. Then, following the instructions that were given to me, I should have taken a taxi to the embankment. This is where we gathered. When I arrived at that place, all the guys were still waiting for someone. A nice car pulled in and our boss got out, a man I had never seen before. He came up to the guys and said that the man was dead. He congratulated me and ordered that I be paid 5000 rubles. He said that I was free for seven days but that I had no right to split from the group. They brought girls to our house, various drinks, and food. This was all at their cost and I could do whatever I wanted with my money.

And so it happened that I became involved with a group of people who were murdering, robbing, raping, and doing other things that were above all a sin, and only then a violation of the law requiring prosecution. Much of the same continued: drinking, lechery, theft, and so on, which one cannot call a normal life. Once, our boss said that we should split up and head to different places for some time. I went home. In three months, I beat up three guys and was caught by the police. During the investigation, a picture was sent to the police department and I was taken for identification. This led to a murder investigation. I was sentenced to nine years. Having sat for the entire sentence and remaining loyal to all the guys, I came back home. At home, life was not working out for me because I had gotten used to big money, girls, and pubs. My father died before I was released. My mom remained, and she would always ask me to go to church and confess, for I had killed a human being after all. I did not understand her at all.

I got six years for robbery and assault which I sat out to the very end. After that, in one month, I again got two years for stealing money. I was released but the local authorities kept their eye on me. I did not like that and exploded at a certain moment. I received one year for something really silly – I was accused of not spending three nights at home. After my release, I promised myself not to meet with any company. Everything was more or less alright. I was taking care of my mother at home in addition to going to work to earn some money. I remembered my criminal past. I started looking for people with criminal pasts. I however, did not make contacts with bigger bosses anymore. Instead, I came across a small gang. My brain betrayed me once again. I did not do any serious offence and just accidentally found myself at the police station. Knowing about my past, they started recruiting me to work for them. I eventually agreed. I was put into cells and the things that they had a hard time finding out quickly became known to me. There were even two murders. It became interesting and very profitable for me. In other words, I had my back covered.

For this kind of work I constantly needed to stay in touch with the criminal world, and I was flawlessly performing my role. I even met one female prisoner. She had done time five times already. I found out certain things from her but she did not suspect anything. I started living with her and she was helping my mother. She was however, drinking all the time and could not control herself. Once she came home drunk on Easter. Nothing was done at home, not even the paska. I could not take it

⁹⁶ Informal expression meaning that nobody saw him in connection with any crime.

anymore and I booted her out of my sight. And she, being drunk, underestimated my strength and began to fight, ending in tragedy. She was instantly killed. I remembered God but it was too late. When I called the police and they arrived, they were trying to comfort me. I got seven years but the sin I had committed is not giving me peace even now. I did not want to commit the second murder and I understood that it was the devil's work. I wasted my life, ruined my health, and today, nobody needs me. In prison, I started moving closer to God. I started praying for the forgiveness of my sins and confessed. I believe that my prayer will be heard by God and I will be forgiven. And for now there is only one thing left to do: pray, pray, and to come to faith with all my heart. Then I will be happy that I have left the devil and will let God live in my heart.

42. Glory to Jesus Christ!

30/01/2001 Dear Father Ihor! I bow before you in appreciation for your industrious work, for your great devotion to the Church and love for our Ukraine, for your sincere praying and your firm faith, for coming to our prison and warming our hearts and souls, making us believe that we can still become better people and stand on the right path. A couple of months ago, I was thinking that this is it, that life is completely and irreversibly broken and that my family is lost. Then I went to church. It was exactly when you were telling about yourself and showing us the book "Why We Love Bandera." I grasped a lot from it and realized that there are people who are devoted to their nation, culture, and their fellow countrymen. I want to listen to your sermons so much, to pray with you and to be at least a little bit like you, and to do at least some good to our nation through prayer.

Thank you for writing such articles, books, and for your parcel. After I received it, I distributed most of it. Maybe it was wrong of me to do so, but all those with whom I shared started going to church for liturgy. I told them that all this was given by God's grace and owed it to you. Some were asking me about my commonalities with you. I replied to them that we both share a common faith in God, Jesus Christ, and that you can see people through and one cannot cheat you. Thanks for opening my eyes to this world and teaching me to do only good. Thank God that there are such people like you in this world. With great respect for you – Volodymyr.

43. * Since childhood on Christmas, I have always sung the carol "The Sad Christmas Eve Dinner of 1946."⁹⁷ I remember how sometime in 1975 and in the following years we stood with the boys in front of the building of the principal's house and sang carols so that all the communists could hear us. When I sing this carol in prison, some inmates start crying, because they hear the words: "mother, mother, where is our daddy, why isn't he having dinner with us?" Once I was preparing the body of Christ for Communion, and suddenly, a couple of hundred inmates entered and sang the carol "New Joy Has Come." That was something! One can never forget something like that. I am grateful to my prison lambs for loving God and Ukraine.

44. Teodor, age thirty-six. I graduated from the institute, got married, and my son was born. This is where everything began. Vodka, fornication with women; I started stealing quietly, then more and more. This mud absorbed me so much that I could not get out of it. I was stabbed and I myself wanted to rid myself of my own life. I was shot, bullets flew above my head, but somehow I was able to stay alive. My mother, who is now dead, used to say that I have luck from God. Now I am starting to understand this, but before it was not getting to my head. And now the time has come to pay for everything. I am deep in horrible sin. My mother died and still I could not stop. My brother died, but I was already in prison then. This halted me, and glory be to God for this because I had already purchased a gun, hand grenades, and could deprive some people of their lives. But I served time for assault and was sentenced to ten years imprisonment. I came to prison and said to myself: "I want no more of this, that's enough, too much evil has been done!" I started to pray, to ask God to let me out of this inferno, but He did not hear me. I was thinking that I am probably a great sinner and that I am so possessed by Satan that nothing can be done about this. On top of all this, I started gasping – asthma. I

⁹⁷ A well-known carol that is sung at Christmas time. It is a tragic story about a Ukrainian family that is surviving the third artificial famine and having a poor supper without their daddy, since he had been forcefully exiled to Siberia.

thought: “that’s it, my end has come. And how much evil has been done? I will have to bear responsibility for all this.”

I prayed even though I was not yet going to church. I asked God to hear me and help me. I entrusted God with all my problems. And later, something started pulling me to church. Slowly but surely, I started going to church and in 2001, before Easter, I went to confession. By that time already, I had a stable job, gave up smoking, and was working out. My relationship with my wife improved. She is also telling me that I have some kind of luck from God. Prior to being sentenced, we had parted with one another and did not live together. My son was growing up without a father. The Lord turned her heart to me. He was taking care of me through her and did not allow me to perish in prison. Now I am doing time, writing this letter and crying, feeling His love for me. Father, I love You with all my heart and soul! Six months after Easter, they shortened my sentence by three years. I was shocked! Who will say that it is not God’s grace? Out of nowhere and for no reason, they just took off three years. It was great joy! After Holy Communion, the asthma disappeared and I stopped gasping. Isn’t that a miracle? I started praying even more and giving thanks to God for not forsaking me in my troubles. Soon I will be free after so many years spent behind bars. It’s an incredible grace from God. I look back at all this and can hardly believe my eyes.

45. Ivan, born in 1976. At first, I was brought up in a home for abandoned toddlers and then in a children’s home where I lived until I was seven. It was very difficult for me there because my skin is black and the teachers mocked me and beat me because of this. Even now I have a scar under my left eye. Although I was little, I remember the home very well, how I wanted to have ice cream, candies, and cookies. But I did not have anything. After the home, I was taken to a secondary boarding school where I stayed for three years and where I heard for the first time the word “nigger.” There I was mocked too. They fed us well but I was always missing a mother. There was an educator at the home who loved me like her own son. Many kind and sensitive people are already with God but I remember them and love them to this day because they never wished any evil upon me.

My classmates nicknamed me “nigger” and “black monkey” and the older ones taught me how to smoke. At school they led me to a nervous breakdown (the principal fed me with cigarettes making me eat a whole pack). After this, I broke the windows and started throwing glass at the principal. Then they accused me by the 85th article for schizophrenia.

We skipped a history lesson to go to a forest, buy two bottles of wine, and drink. One of the educators took me to the washroom and beat me there. He broke a washing-stand with my head and tortured me for around thirty minutes until a teacher came and saw what was going on (the entire washroom was covered in blood) and he stood between us. But the educator did not like that and the two started fighting. This teacher protected us and in general, didn’t let the educators beat us. He told us a lot about Afghanistan.⁹⁸

We were often beaten for going to church or singing carols. We were always told that our parents are Stalin and Lenin whose portraits hung in all the classrooms and dormitories. In April of 1992, a priest came and asked us who was not baptized, and there were many of us, including me. My godparents do not accept me because I am black. I never took or asked anything from them because I knew it would be in vain. One family wanted to adopt me but I did not accept them, because they were not meant to be my foster parents (they were Jehovah Witnesses and so I refused). After school, I entered a technical college to become a bricklayer and carpenter. There, orphans were also treated unfairly. That same winter, I entered the University of Culture and Choreography as a part-time student. After graduating from college, I started to work. I was often hungry because I became so used to the food from the boarding school. I realized for the first time in my life that I had to learn how to cook. The wives of my colleagues helped me a bit.

In 1994, I was called for army service and they sent me to a reconnaissance battalion. It was difficult for me there. The corporals were mocking me and that’s why they moved me to serve in a hospital. Then they de-commissioned me from the army and I came home. I had no job but I had to

⁹⁸ During Brezhnev’s rule, a lot of Ukrainian soldiers were sent to Afghanistan. Many returned in caskets or were seriously paralyzed (without legs or hands); the rest were traumatized psychologically for the rest of their lives.

survive and so I joined a dirty gang after which I was sentenced to two years. In 1997, I was sentenced to another five years. After my release, they did not give me back my apartment. I addressed various people and institutions with this problem, leading to nothing but dead-ends. I asked them, but they threatened me and called the police who would eventually beat me. I told them that I wanted to live and not just exist, and that I did not want to live with complete strangers. But they would scold me with the f...word. I started drinking again to the point of losing consciousness. People could see how the authorities were laughing at me. Then I lost it, and again committed a crime. We beat up a taxi driver and I was sentenced to eleven years. This is how I found myself here. Nobody believes me, but my life has not worked out for me. Maybe if I had a mother things would be different, but I realized that life has turned its back on me and that it's very difficult for a black man to live among the whites in this world.

In prison, I had a tantrum – I already wanted to kill one inmate or take away my own life. Furthermore, my cell-mates treat me like worthless scrap. This is how people leave this world. Frankly, I am fed up with such a life and every night, before I go to bed, I ask God to take me from here as soon as He can. Destiny has been harsh on me: I was sentenced unlawfully and my dreams of having a wife and a normal life have not come true. In general, I am not a bad craftsman, like to work, have never been nor will I ever be a criminal because I do not want to determine someone's destiny. I believe that only God can decide a human's destiny and not the people who sin in this world. I will eventually be released from this cursed prison, when I will be thirty-six. I have spent my entire youth in prison and I do not know how to live further.

Yes, it is very hard in prison, you can't envision it even in the worst nightmare and I would not wish it upon my worst enemy. One does not get re-educated here, only injured and broken. And in such a way, my whole life so far has been spent in prisons and homes and there is no one to give me a helping hand. I recently confessed. The priest opened my eyes. Since that time, my life has changed for the better and the Virgin Mary is miraculously helping me with everything. If God provides me with health and strength, as soon as I get out of here, the first thing that I will do is go to a church and light a candle.

46. 17/01/2002 Ruslan, born in 1968. My mother divorced my father when I was still little but I remember him very well. He was constantly drinking and beating me and my brother for the silliest things. My mom could not put up with this anymore and divorced him. She would teach both of us only good things. I studied very well in school but my behaviour was unacceptable. I was a great hooligan and began to smoke at an early age. After the fifth grade, I tried drinking liquor. I did not like it but I had to do what the whole group was doing. After school, I went to work. I was young, stupid, healthy, and did not pay attention to the warnings of those who wished me good. Once I was returning drunk from work when I ran into a man who was also tipsy and picking on under aged children. I "refreshed" him quite a bit and hit him a couple of times. Then they sentenced me to three years for violent hooliganism. After my release, everything went downhill – drinking, women, friends, fights. I tried doing drugs. Again there was fighting, theft, and serious weaponry. They gave me five years. I was released and again apprehended for fighting and theft.

When I was sentenced to four years and ended up in the same prison as before, I did not worry much. They greeted me well, gave me work, and helped me out with everything because I was already an "oldie." Roughly two years later, I discovered that there is a priest of the Greek Catholic Church who comes to prison to serve liturgy. I started going for liturgy every Sunday and praying every day. I went to confession for the first time after which I felt respite in my soul. This does not mean that in freedom I never went to church. Stated otherwise, during the communist regime this was forbidden, but my mother and I would always go on Easter to kiss the shroud of Christ. But little did I know what a liturgy was. And thank God for sending us Father Ihor – may the Lord give him great health and a long life. Because of this priest, I began to understand who God is.

Despite this, the devil started seducing me even more and after my release, I was not able to restrain myself for long. Because of drugs, I got myself into such trouble that I almost died. On Christmas 2000, I was taken to hospital for a surgery. When I did not need to use crutches anymore, I

realized that my salvation was in prison. I purposefully returned to prison in order to lead a normal life. In the morning and in the evening, I prayed and went to work and to church because in freedom, I failed to do all these things. I brought my relatives so much sorrow and anguish that only God knows alone. I am quite aware of the fact that I am not yet ready to live according to God's law, but I will try my best, although it is not easy. And may God give me wisdom to be one day with Him in heaven because life is too complicated for such simple mortal creatures like me and I have to live it in dignity, for all without exception will have to stand accountable before God.

47. Semen, born in 1966. Before imprisonment, I lived with my wife. I ended up in jail because of a brawl; I beat up three drug addicts... Before, I was into boxing, karate, and taught teenagers in the officers' building. Frankly, I do not complain about my fate because everything that is happening in my life is from God. In freedom, I seldom went to church. Owing to Father Ihor, I am learning more and more about our Saviour Jesus and the Virgin Mary and I am being pulled closer and closer to them. I am also bearing my wife's cross because she had a couple of abortions without even telling me. She thought that she could hide them from me.

In late February and early March, I was very ill and was running a high temperature – 104 degrees Fahrenheit (39.7 C). I went to the medical station where they only exempted me from work but had no injections or pills to give me. I took a book about Metropolitan Andrey, said the "Our Father," "Hail Mary," and the "Creed," and in one hour my temperature decreased. I also had a conflict at work and ten of us were taken to the commission. I had a book of Sheptytsky with me and I was praying along the way. Everybody received seven or ten nights and days while I was only reproached. I left the office with tears in my eyes. I was so grateful to Sheptytsky for his help.

48. Tymour, has done time for nine years. I was born in 1956 in the Volga region. After school, I was conscripted into the army and this is where it all began. We had a separate special military company. Then came the war in Afghanistan. At first, everything seemed to be interesting like in a movie. My perception of war changed when I saw the real war: explosions and bullets flying in the air above your head. I risked death from my very first battle. My buddy was torn into pieces by a mine in front of my eyes. It was horrible and became a reason for hatred and cruelty. We became angry and furious like beasts. We embarked on murderous sprees considering ourselves to be heroes. I was young, energetic, strong, and I killed everyone I saw along my way. Then my turn came to spend some time in the hospital. My stomach was torn by a shell-splinter. This was when I remembered God. I was secretly asking Him to save my life so that I could see my mother again. He must have probably helped me then. When I was demobilized, I expected to be greeted like a hero but it was the opposite. Everybody was staring at me as if I was a hired assassin. But they smiled at me when looking into my eyes, probably out of fear. I started robbing people and was thrown behind bars. In prison I started to seriously think about God. I was encouraged to do so by Father Ihor who opened the eyes of someone like me. He became a spiritual father to me. God is helping me, and prayer is my only salvation.

Glory to Jesus!

Father, I am still here, in the investigation isolator. I am not doing well. They lost one of my lungs and for four months already, I have been living with only one. My legs became paralyzed and started rotting along with my buttocks. I am waiting to be transported to Kherson for surgery. Whether I survive or not depends on God. I am completely naked and barefoot. Help me, maybe for the last time. I am living only on prayers and count only on your help. I am hoping and waiting for you. May God protect you. I am praying for you. With respect – Tymour.

Good day to you, dear daddy!

After your departure my life went down the drain. I am sitting here not because of my own fault but because the one who was supposed to sit here is not alive anymore. I am ill with tuberculosis, cirrhosis, bronchitis, gastritis, and dystrophy. Doctors said that I am a walking corpse. For the second year already, I cannot gain more weight to go over fifty kilograms. When I walk, it seems like the

winds rule me and I am losing consciousness. My liver aches so much that I have forgotten what sleeping is. I look like a prisoner from Buchenwald. It is probably my imminent death that makes me want to talk to you so much. I was almost ready to deprive myself of my own life; who needs a life like this anyways? I am not afraid of death, I just don't want to die in a prison and be buried like a dog. There is no one who would even cry for me.

Daddy, I want to see you and tell you everything! And I have something to talk about. I am alive thanks to one person who opened my heart to God. He helps both morally and materially so that I do not die from hunger. I am talking about a priest who baptized me. Now I have two parents. I have only one joy – seeing the priest on Sunday. When you arrive here, you must come to know Father Ihor. Please bring me as many goods as you possibly can, chocolate, and various pastries, for I have not eaten such sweets in a long time. Do not spare any money for your prodigal son. Even those who have been convicted to death have their last wish fulfilled. I am praying for you and for Father Ihor. I am giving you my kisses and looking forward to seeing you. * Tymour died in 2003.

49. Konstantyn. I am twenty-seven and have been convicted three times. At the age of fourteen, I was sentenced to two years, at the age of seventeen to six, and at twenty-three to five. The story that you're about to read is the failure of a person that exemplifies the brand of criminality. One is never born a criminal but becomes one because of life's circumstances. Since I was little, I can remember a drunken father, swearing, fighting, and my mother always covered in tears. My parents divorced and sent me to an institution for special education. There, it was like a child who wants to pick up a flower and is beaten on the hands without any explanation. This violence only led to resistance and rebellion against the surrounding world. In the first grade, they sent me to a boarding school with a quasi-military environment, a mini "principle of the elders."⁹⁹ That same year, they kicked me out of there with such a reputation that no school wanted to take me. Some time after, they took me to a village school. For one and the same misdoing, all the kids were simply rebuked while I was drawn by the ears and beaten on the fingers with a ruler. Whenever I had good marks for schoolwork, they would give me poor marks for my behaviour.

My mom and I were poor, our neighbours clothed us, and I ate wherever I could. As a result, other people humiliated me and I always felt that I was different from the rest. I quickly realized that I had no friends. I found myself in the hands of a man who was older than me, a scoundrel, and because of him, I got into prison on charges of theft. I absorbed the worst things that exist in society and then just went with the flow of the criminal world. The book of life, the Bible, made me ponder over my life and I wanted to be alone; I understood that in the twilight of our soul, not only can crime be born but also a paradise of light hopes and dreams. I was faced with one ultimatum: to accept Jesus or let evil take over me...

Having read the Bible, I experienced a great shock – tears were running down my eyes. Looking back at my lost youth, at all the madness of my past, I saw the star of the "first day" twinkling before me and the feeling of the "sixth day" when a "new man" will be created. I started going to the prison church and started pondering over the necessity of Holy Communion. I went for confession and said to the priest that I may sin again although I am currently repenting. What shall I do about this? He responded with the question: "do you wash your underwear? Your soul is the same." It was a perfect answer for me. I cannot describe the state of my soul after confession and Communion. I became free and felt like I was God's child. If nature around us is charming and was created by the Lord, than what does one feel after taking a part of Him for himself?...

* After his release, Konstantyn brought me an extremely beautiful icon of the Saviour and asked me to pass it on to a seriously ill girl named Maryana. He looked full of life and energy. May God provide him with a happy destiny and may he never return to prison again.

50. 20/06/1999 Hennadiy, born in 1960. My father was the principal of a school and my mother was a teacher. Everything was alright at first but an evil time came to us as well. My dad either shot himself dead or had someone do it for him, I do not know. We, three orphans, stayed with our

⁹⁹ i.e. the principle according to which the older in age or rank allow themselves to mock or beat the younger ones.

mother. I graduated from a military college and then went to the army. I was a convinced atheist. I got married, divorced, and ended my service in the army. I found myself in prison and started going to church because I was baptized. I confessed my sins and liked the sermon of Father Ihor. In his plain and understandable language, he managed to captivate my soul. And not only mine, but also those of the other inmates as well.

I would like to particularly emphasize the following story. For about half a year, my ear was aching and festering. I could not hear well and slept poorly at night. There was no medicine at the medical station. One day Father Ihor was distributing little icons with a prayer to Metropolitan Sheptytsky and asked us to say this prayer from time to time. In approximately three weeks, the pain became more bearable and then disappeared completely, and the ear stopped festering. It was as if I was born again into this world, and all this owing to Father Ihor and the prayers. I hope I will strengthen my faith with his help even though I have one sin – I cannot quit smoking. I also have hatred in my soul against my younger brother and want to take revenge on him. Lord, please help me to refrain from doing stupid things when I get out of here. I want to see my son and my wife and I am tired of such a life.

51. 10/01/2001 *Kyrylo*. I was born in 1961 in a picturesque village in an ordinary peasant family. My dad was from Volyn and my mom was forcefully deported from the Peremyshl area. We lived happily, albeit in poverty. Since early childhood, my parents taught me how to work and took me to church. I went to school and studied well. At the age of eighteen, I was conscripted into the Soviet Army. I began my service with the paratroopers in Afghanistan. When I stepped on Afghan soil for the first time, I felt fear inside and could not understand why we, young guys, were brought here, so far away from home. When I heard bullets whistling above me and bombs and missiles being detonated, I realized that this was war. We were dumped in the most dangerous areas of the country. When I saw once how a Russian officer was praying, I thought that I should also turn to God. I started praying every day. I saw a lot of cripples, wounded, and dead people in Afghanistan, and I myself killed a lot of people. It was war after all.

I was injured and scraped in one battle and was taken to a local field hospital. There, I understood that this war was going to be a long one and that innocent people were perishing. In order not to kill people, I cut off the forefinger on my right hand. I had eight more months of service left. From the hospital they took me straight for an investigation. I was sent back to the Soviet Union. There I was sentenced to four years for eluding military duties. I came back home in 1985. I went to work as a driver, got married, and had a son. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, I was fired when a certain number of employees had to be cut. I became unemployed but I still had to live somehow and feed my family. This horror made me drink and steal. This went on for some time but everything has its ending. I was caught and so I am in prison again. In prison, I confessed and only here I understood that I just cannot live without God. I go for liturgy every Sunday because God is our only salvation. I am calling all people to repent and come to God before it is too late. I am grateful to Father Ihor for bringing me parcels and letting me feel that I am also God's child even though I have sinned so much.

Glory to Jesus Christ!

25/07/2004 Dear Father Ihor, I am currently in a labour camp but here it is even worse than in prison. Every single job here is tied to chemicals and no priests come here. As a result, I gathered twelve boys and they gave us one room. We meet every Sunday to read the Bible which I have brought here with me.

07/11/2004 We have finally done some major renovating in one room and a Greek Catholic priest is now coming to us on major feast days. The runoff elections will soon take place and I think that Ukraine will do well once again. We are praying for everything to be alright and we believe that the Ukrainian people will emerge victorious in this difficult struggle. Please send my regards to all those who share our views in prison. May the Lord bless you with strong health and may the Virgin Mary place you under her protection! With respect and love – your faithful Kyrylo.

52. Glory to Jesus Christ!

11/08/2002 Dear Father Ihor, having come from church today, I decided to write you a letter because there is nobody else to whom I could write and so I decided that I could write at least to you. Maybe it is even better for me that I am in prison because I am 100% sure that in freedom I would not have survived until now. Here in prison, I learnt a lot of new things. I can earn a living for myself with my own hands in addition to helping someone else. In prison, I got great practice in artistic house-painting with water colours and gouache. I paint landscapes. I am grateful to the Lord and to you, Father Ihor, for opening my spiritual eyes even though I have never rejected religion or God. In my childhood, I sang carols as part of the Nativity scene play even though the police and teachers would always persecute us. It was scary and exciting at the same time. I knew that I was not going to make any profit from theft but I stole to spend the money on drinking and in order not to buy the bare necessities of life. In our Soviet state as you know, everybody stole because people were sick with kleptomania. When going home from work, they took everything they could, and only few were punished and irregularly. Everybody was looking at them in a different way, extending their hand to them and smiling at them; not for the sake of praise but out of fear – this is a prisoner.

When a human being is well-nourished, healthy, financially independent, he forgets about God. I know this from my own life. I was drinking vodka and selling expensive things from my home. Satan was becoming more and more of a friend while drawing me into his traps. I was forgetting about prayer and was turning into a beast because I used to serve in the naval infantry, was healthy, and had good fighting skills. Once we stole a motorcycle from my neighbour to get to the girls in the neighbouring village. Even though we put it back in the morning, we were tried and sentenced to two years imprisonment. Young, unenthusiastic about work, I had fun and did not work anywhere for a long time. The cops were constantly nagging me because I was not paying 20% of my taxes. I stopped coming home, stayed with my friends, at train stations, and other various places where I could have a drink with someone, swindle someone, steal, or take something by force – an object or money. There was another trial and I got another three years in prison.

When I returned, my friends were not interested in my life anymore because they already had their own families. Only sometimes would they ask me for some legal help. They were greeting me and shaking my hand because they were afraid of me. They thought that now, after prison, I was ready to do anything and that it was a piece of cake for me to kill a person and that prison had now become my dear home. I returned to my old habits again, began stealing everything that was not tied down, and carried out various other tasks that were requested of me. Once we got into a house. There we found different belongings of a professional robber who, being an official authority, looked after himself in this way. Another guy who was twenty-seven years older than me decided to steal a new gas heater. In the morning, after our hangover, we decided to sell it. Exactly at that moment, the district policeman came to our village. He instantly recognized us.

I fled to Transcarpathia having told my friends that I skipped town to go to Ivano-Frankivsk, confusing the cops of my whereabouts. You just have to tell the forbidden information to your pals and then the police will be looking for you where you are least likely to have gone. In Mukachevo, I was constantly caught up in stealing different things. I could not stay there for long, felt certain nostalgia, and came home only to have a policeman arrest me. My “colleague” confessed everything, betraying even his own dog that was with us during the robbery. During the trial, I was begging for my “colleague” so that he wouldn’t go to prison. And so it happened, he was sent to do community service and I was sentenced to three years in a maximum security penitentiary.

In half a year, I fell ill with tuberculosis and was transported to Kherson where I started to turn more towards God. I repented for burning half of the New Testament when I was ill. The treatment was very difficult and I had to give up smoking, started reading more spiritual literature, and spoke with the convicts who at least had some faith in God. I felt relieved inside. I started working on myself more and more and got rid of the jargon and swear words from my speech. I would regularly pray three times a day to God. After half of my term, I was amnestied. But again with my friends, I committed a theft and

we were sentenced to four years. I was writing letters to them but no one would respond. Here in prison, I realized that none of my former friends need me.

The one who really needs me is God, because He stopped me and gave me time to have a look at my actions and an opportunity to change my life. Soon I will turn thirty-five and I have nothing, no family and no kids. During this last imprisonment of mine, I lost my last relatives: my father and brother. I am glad that there is at least a house that's left and that after my release I will have a place to stay. I am grateful to God that He brought you, Father Ihor, into my life and that you were helping me both spiritually and financially. It is very difficult here because you constantly live with the same people and the more you come to know humans, the more you start liking dogs. I am asking God to enlighten my brain and help me live the rest of my life in dignity. With respect for you – Maryan.

I want to write to you about the things that have been disturbing me for quite a while. I know how difficult it is for you to get the medicine, glasses, and other things. Unfortunately, all this goes to those who are not going to church. Everything goes to their hands with the goal of making sheer profit and the desire to gain something from someone's tragedy. The glasses are not for reading the Bible but for reading Chase's crime novels and then they laugh and boast about how they tricked the priest. It is even funny to see a man in his seventies, ready for his unction (may God forgive me because I am not the one who decides this), but he does not even bother about repentance. At least one person from each section should be in a church committee and work together with you at solving these problems so that everything goes to those who are in dire need and not to those who cheat, who cheated people in freedom and now, continue doing the same. I am asking you dear Father to listen to this proposal. May the Lord help you open our eyes to the past and the future. May God give you health and all the good things from the Lord Jesus Christ.

* We brought glasses with Yosyp to the prison because old men were approaching us saying that they cannot read the Holy Scriptures. Why shouldn't we help in such a situation? Some time later, an officer called us to his office and rebuked us – from now on it is forbidden to bring glasses without a prescription from an optometrist. As it turned out, our parishioners made a spyglass and were looking inside the apartments that surround the prison. I almost burst out of laughter.

Dear Father Ihor, overcoming my shame, I summoned enough courage in me to write my request to you. I am in trouble health-wise – tuberculosis. I need vitamins and I have no relatives. I do not want to complain to you about my destiny because it is my fault. Maybe it is even better that I am in prison, for I have understood and reflected over a lot. Owing to you, I have come to know God on a closer note. In freedom, I did not have time for that. Soon I will be transported for treatment to Kherson. I do not know for how long God will separate me from you. I am asking Him in my prayers to make me get better soon so that I can return to our prison church. But the seed is being sown and gives fruit and people are changing. I had chosen the way that was leading to either prison or the cemetery.

I will miss you and Mr. Yosyp very much. I am asking you to pray for my health and my return. May the Lord and the Virgin Mary help us get reunited soon. Therefore, I am asking you Father Ihor, to write something to me at the end of January. I will be looking forward to your letter. Maryan.

Dear Father Ihor! It was very hard in the tuberculosis hospital. The mortality rate there is astounding. There were times when four people would die in one day. I was cloaked in fear but everything is in God's hands and so I was giving it all to God. I was not making any plans because I could see some of my friends walking and then in a couple of hours, they would pass on to eternity. This was all happening in front of my eyes for otherwise, I would not have believed it. I was praying to God for my health and the health of others and was constantly mentioning in my prayers our church in prison, Father Ihor, and cantor Yosyp, and those who attend liturgy in faith. I was asking for a blessing from the liturgy that was being celebrated in my absence. The three to four centimetre puncture in my left lung has disappeared. I am happy that I am alive and that I can again come to our church in prison and give praise to the Lord for my recovery and return to western Ukraine.

I am grateful for the medicine with which you are helping me. To tell you the truth, I have not yet in my sinful life met a person like you Father. I always feel respite inside of me when listening to your sermons or seeing you. Many times when I would wake up at night following the liturgy in church, my soul was so profoundly touched by it that the words in my mind were asking to be sung. I know that

the Holy Spirit was filling me with power and cleansing my sinful body. Much of what you told me came true. Sometimes it would come true in a couple of years and sometimes, on that very day. I am very grateful to God that there are such people who help us, inmates, support us morally, spiritually, as well as materially. May God give you health. I am also very grateful to Yosyp.

During your leave of absence I was faced with only problems, both health and soul related. I was taken to the parole commission. The head of our department described me only from a negative point of view. My soul is aching. I have done so much good here and have played a leading role in renovating certain rooms. I did not hear one “thanks” for this. What was the use of that? I was breathing in the paint and the dust, crawling on these walls like a spider, and others were thanked instead of me because they have parents and money. For as long as I have been alive, I have not been as stressed and pissed off as I am now. I am ready to do just about anything to fight for justice. I have not gone crazy so far only for the sake of you, Father. I feel sorry for you and our church because Mr. Yosyp is away and I have to replace him as cantor. Tonight, I had a look at myself in the mirror and I was shocked by what I saw. Who do I resemble these days? I am thirty-five and I look as if I am fifty-five, all because of my nerves that are constantly tense. I know Father that there is hell in that other world (the free world), but it seems to me that it begins here, in prison. From all the places where I have done time in the Soviet Union, I got such a huge wound in my soul only here, in this institution of confinement. With respect for you – Maryan.

February 2003. Dear Father! Soon my sentence will end and I will have to go to freedom. I currently have a few concerns regarding my shoes and pants. You know that I have no relatives and there is no one else who would need me. As you said Father, strangers become dear people, and I saw this many times in my life. If you have a chance, please help me. Sorry for giving you so much trouble. I was thinking many times of the pig that does not go back to its mud. You know Father that in freedom, normal people turn their backs on such people as me. Then, unintentionally, a person goes back to his/her old ways that lead to hell. I will try to do as you taught me. With respect for you – Maryan.

53. Glory to Jesus Christ!

20/11/2000 *Pavlo*. I am twenty-eight. I am in prison for the third time. I am thankful to God for bringing me here because this is where Jesus found me. Nobody came to visit me for a long time and I was constantly thinking to myself: “why is nobody coming to me?” And on one Sunday a priest was supposed to serve liturgy. My heart said: “go to church and everything will be alright.” I suddenly remembered that the Bible says: “seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” (Matthew 6: 33). And so I believed this and went to church. During the liturgy I was told that my relatives came to visit me. Out of joy, my heart almost broke free from my chest because I knew that the Lord had done it for me. Since that time, I started going to church regularly but I was still sinning: smoking, swearing. I confessed my sins and opened my heart to God by letting Him in. Friends, you may not believe me, but since that day, I do not smoke or swear anymore even though I smoked before that for fifteen years, tried to give it up four times but lasted only five days at most. But now, I understand that when God liberates someone, it is a true liberation because I can feel it even though I am here, in prison. I would still wish that many people experience the joy that I am currently experiencing.

54. Ostap. I was born in 1955. There were four of us in the family: three sisters and me, one boy. As they say, it’s a women’s kingdom in the household. Beginning in early childhood, we worked together with our mom on the collective farm. I studied in a boarding school for nine years. I had to repeat the sixth grade because I whispered a poem to a girl during one class and the teacher gave me a failing grade. For this I told her: “out with the occupiers!” I slammed the door behind me and left the classroom. I was never as good with schoolwork as I was with my hands and practical things. Soon I graduated from a college where I studied to become an electrician. After my time in the army, I came home and went to work with agricultural technical devices. I was brought up in the spirit of communist morality. Since I was seven, I, like many children around me, were told that God does not exist. We don’t need the sun – the party is shining for us, we do not need bread – give us only work. When I grew

up, I went to church but the old ladies would start gossiping: he's standing the wrong way, he made the sign of cross at the wrong time. But what could I have known if I had been educated in a boarding school and they did not teach us any of these things? On Easter, by the church, the teachers, activists, and district policeman would stand and shoo us, teenagers, away. When we grew up, we did not dare to go to church because we did not know anything. And to stand in a place of worship like a scarecrow was shameful.

In 1980, I married a woman from the neighbouring village and there the church was closed. I was constantly fighting with the authorities. People and my mother-in-law were asking me to help them with the church. I agreed. They collected signatures from village residents. I went to both the regional and district councils. The authorities started hating me for this. The commission arrived with the priest. They made order in the church, cleaned it, and put up embroidered towels. The representatives of the commission left, and the priest stayed. People started going to their own church. My mother-in-law went every Sunday along with the kids.

Please excuse me if something sounds wrong, for I am an old fool. I was convicted three times. I was convicted for the first time because of the authorities. Since I was giving them trouble all the time, they decided to trick me. And as for the second and third times, I did time because of my wife and her stubbornness. This time I was sentenced to five years and had done time because of my brother-in-laws, Omelian, and Danylo. That's why she is getting revenge on me: she does not write to me and does not allow the children to do the same. She is inciting the seven children to go against me. If she does not stop doing these silly things I will punish her, and cruelly I might add. I will sell the house and she will have no place to live. Or here, in prison, I will start playing cards to lose everything that I have gained and she will be left without a means of survival. It will be a good lesson to not only her but all women. I have a place to live – I've got a house in Kryvulia. And I will destroy this one to punish her. The fact that I am sitting here is proof of how she has punished herself and the kids. I am from a boarding school, I did not grow by my mother's side, and I have experienced enough grief since the age of six. I was then pasturing 600 cattle and was running around barefoot from spring to fall! Father Ihor, I would ask you to write a letter to my daughter. I think that after this the children may write back to me. Yours – Ostap.

* After this letter, I shouted at Ostap for his intention to play cards and lose the house. I forbade him from doing that. Ostap has sat for ten years already. He is short and on many occasions, people showed an eagerness to make fun of him. But one of them was hit on the nose with a hammer and the other with a kettle on the head, and now there are no more takers. Ostap has seven children and I told him many times that I can make a parcel to pass over to them, and he said: "I, Father, work as an electrician and with my own hands I earn my living. Give it to someone else." To hear this in prison is something incredible!

12/10/2001 Thank you Father for this work that you are doing among us, sinners. Thank you for not being mean with us, prisoners, because some people in freedom do not consider us to be people. You confessed me for the first time in my life and I am grateful to you for the support that you have given me in such a harsh hour and for loving people regardless of their background or nationality. I am happy that our church in prison is named after the martyr Josaphat.

I beg you, please do everything necessary to make it possible for the kids to stand in front when they come to church unless the old women badger them. Children want to see everything. They are curious and their desire to go to church should be fostered because they are our future. The way we teach them will reflect the way we will live in the future. May God bless you and may God's Mother protect you against the evil that people are doing, especially old wicked women! May the parishioners of the church love you in the same way as the Virgin Mary loves her Son and the way in which we, prisoners, love you! May they stand up for you like a mountain against the mafia and partocrats.¹⁰⁰ Prisoner Ostap.

¹⁰⁰ i.e. various bureaucratic structures which instead of fixing reality in papers, are only becoming an obstacle to reality and thus, to God Himself.

55. 14/10/2001 We, convicts, greet you Father Ihor on the occasion of the feast of the Protection of Our God's Mother, the Virgin Mary, and on the anniversary of your restless work for the sake of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church. Today is exactly ten years since you became a priest. We, people with broken lives and destinies, are spending our time behind bars for various crimes in a maximum security prison. Every Sunday, we come with pleasure to listen to your rich sermons that teach us love for Christ in the spirit of Christian morality and patriotism to our beloved Ukraine. Thanks for not being mean with us and constantly coming to us to serve Divine Liturgy in this prison. For all these pastoral things we are grateful to you Father Ihor. I bow my head before you. Good health to you and success in everything. Happiness to you and a long and happy life!

God's Mother was going through Ukrainian villages,
In churches people started greeting her.
They bowed and prayed as the wind is whistling,
All together they sang: "rejoice, Mary!"

God's Mother was passing by Ukrainian prisons,
All the tearful inmates started begging.
Protect us sinners, heaven is singing,
All together they sang: "rejoice, Mary!"

56. Glory to Jesus Christ!

14/10/2000 *Andriy*. Dear Mr. Ihor! I am very grateful to you for the letter, books, and picture. When listening to your sermons and reading your books, I make the right conclusions. Every day I am more convinced that your difficult work in God's field is bringing certain results. I am especially grateful to God that such a wonderful person has appeared in my life; a person that is helping us, people with difficult destinies, to find the path to God. When I observe the prisoners of our institution, I make for myself the following conclusion: people who are going to church are not violators of prison regulations. They do not swear, do not smoke, read spiritual literature, and try to live according to God's commandments and the Sermon on the Mount. And what is even more interesting, they are bringing the Gospel to others. They are the light of the world. To those people who come to church, including me, you bring joy with the very fact of your coming to them. We feel like humans who are really getting ready to become free. I am reading your letter, compare it with the books written by you, and I can say with confidence that you really are a patriot of our beloved Ukraine, which you love and cherish endlessly and unconditionally. You hate the communist satanic order and mafias and with your life, you illustrate what it's like to lead a Christian life and have a firm faith in God. In your sermons, you bring to us Biblical wisdom and open love for our unfortunate Ukraine while calling us to fight with the sword of our mouths against satanic atheists. I am praying for the Lord to help you and Mr. Yosyp in all good things.

11/11/2000 Mr. Ihor, I decided to write to you with a request for help. Recently, my relatives have stopped writing to me. Mom and dad are already old; they are both seventy-six. I know that my mother is seriously ill following the death of my brother. I beg you, if God's grace be for this and if you can, please call my family. I also want to express my gratitude for the knowledge that you are giving me, the books you are bringing, and the spiritual literature. With love to God and respect for you – Andriy.

24/11/2000 Again I decided to write a letter to you, to inform you that I am looking forward to Sunday to come to listen to the liturgy and to your informative sermons. You are of great help to us, the lambs who got lost in this life. When I am watching the people who go to church, I can see great change in their lives. People change their personalities completely. Their behaviour, attitude towards life, and their way of living are different from the general population of inmates. Thus, one can make a conclusion that your work is not in vain Mr. Ihor! You want to help me with my treatment. If it is

possible, please bring me some medicine. Thank you ahead of time. Also, I have a request to ask of you. If you have a Biblical Encyclopedia or a dictionary, please bring them to me for some time. Please send my regards to Maryana and Olesia (ill girls for whom I am praying daily). Their suffering is making us become better. Peace and love be in your heart.

09/12/2000 I am sincerely grateful to you for helping me with my medicine. How could you have known that I asked you to bring me drugs? I am already forty-three and for almost a year and a half now, I am with God. How can I let down the person who is giving me peace in my soul? Am I still in your eyes such a rogue and bastard, like the rest here think? You cannot think of me in this way, because I have indeed become different. I believe in God and do not want to live a sinful life anymore. Glory be to God for your help to me. The inflammation has stopped but the ulcer is not receding. I am writing this letter to you and I really cannot focus on any particular topic. It's some kind of anxiety although I am calm on the outside. It's an inner struggle with myself. My knowledge is probably doing me harm. Happy birthday to you! I wish you peace, lots of love, joy, wisdom, and great happiness from God – the Heavenly Father! Goodbye. Andriy.

57. * In May of 2002, one lady who was a close friend of the bishop said: “Father, you have too much love for the people of Kamyanyets-Podilsky.” And in one week, another woman who was in the underground church and was very religious said to me: “Father, you have too much love for the inmates.” – Christians are judging me for love! Perhaps they haven't read in the Holy Scriptures: “try to be at peace with everyone, and try to live a holy life, because no one will see the Lord without it.” (Hebrews 12: 14).

58. *August 2003. Askold.* I was born in the Poltava region in 1962. “Do not fear your enemies – they can only kill; do not fear your friends – they can only betray; fear the careless people – it is because of their silent agreement that all crimes are committed.” What has brought me to church, to repentance? – First and foremost, I think it was my baptism as a child. My father, though a drunkard, insisted on this will before my mother and I as a child, was baptized in our Ukrainian Church. I was never careless and I was always interested in everything. Although my efforts had good intentions and meant well, they often turned out all wrong. Neither was I ever angry or cruel; I never shed a drop of human blood but I was stealing, and doing this a lot. It was not because of a good life of course, my mom was very ill and we could not make both ends meet. And so I started stripping the state, forgetting about everything else in the world. My mom was always asking me to give this up and to repent. I made a promise, but I had grown so used to the money which I needed more and more. I started drinking, not often though, because my profession did not allow me to do so. My mother said that one cannot build happiness on somebody's grief, but this would not reach my consciousness. I was proud and cocky. I used to think that for the money I had, I could buy any police station. This turned out to be true on many occasions but everything has its ending...

I sat for nineteen years in prisons and destroyed my life completely. At the age of forty, I read the Gospel for the first time and for the first time I feared the Lord! But how difficult for me was this road to God...I was tortured by a stomach ulcer. I cannot eat what they cook here. I gave up smoking and the nicotine cravings are driving me crazy. I am praying ten times a day on the rosary. It's helping, I stopped coughing. My stomach aches from time to time, but not so often. I received a parcel! Hurray! Thank you, Father. I first kiss the bread like a sacred message, and only then do I eat it. How important it is for a human being to have a spiritual teacher, a leader. I am happy because I have a Father who is sewing the seeds of justice among us, criminals. This is not easy work, but it bears fruit – there are more than 100 inmates who do not miss the sermon each Sunday and listen breathlessly to the word of God. Our Father is capable of bringing the word of God to criminals. And the most important thing is that he is a man of deep faith, and we get energized from him with this faith, for one would not listen to every human being and with our priest one cannot help but listen! And this is another reason for my repentance. Thanks to this person, I did not commit suicide. I came to the conclusion that God exists! Faith in God is the best thing that a human being can have! All the rest is just an illusion, vanity... My

favourite place in the Gospel is the parable of the prodigal son. My favourite feast day is Christmas. The soul rejoices. Now I also belong to the Christian family. I often confess and have Communion. I have never felt so good in my whole life. I believe! Lord, how wonderful!

December 2003. I have got a stomach ulcer and the horrible pains have led me to desperation. I took a razor and lied down on the bed. I started asking God for help so that he would make me stronger. My eyes were shut and I was crying under the blanket. When the spasms started choking me, I moved my leg and saw the picture with the grave of Metropolitan Andrey hanging in front of me. It seemed to me suddenly that the picture was glistening in the sun. I remembered the story of this man. He did not have it easier than me. And I thought: “and he was not cutting his veins and he was not depriving himself of his life...” And what am I doing? I took down this picture and put it on my chest near my heart. I started talking in my mind with this man. I suddenly felt such shame that I even moaned, not from pain but from the shame of my wasted life, from wanting to end my life.

I started asking God to give me power to stand up in this life. And then peace came. I fell asleep. And at night I again saw my old dream, how my mother was praying to the Most Holy Virgin Mary and asking her for permission to pray for my sins and the sins of my brother. God’s Mother replied to her – “No! They must pray themselves for their own sins.” My mom had such a vision, and her stories often come to me in dreams. But I am not afraid of this! I am even happy that I see the Virgin Mary and hear her voice!

59. * Today is December 20, 2002. I buried Orest who was born in 1958 and had done time for twenty-two years. A year ago, he left prison, drank, and died. In prison he came up to me, sincerely confessed his sins, and then did it again for the second time before his release. On the day of his passing, he went to church and again confessed. He ended his life with God. May he stay in eternal memory, for he was a good man, and sat for silly things. One of his brothers died already and the second one is barely alive. His poor mother had three sons – all without a good destiny...Had he sat longer, he would not have died because of the discipline and order. With time, the outside world had simply devoured him. In prison he was drinking black tea and lived. In freedom, he was drinking vodka in huge amounts until he dug himself his own grave.

60. * Once I brought a rope from prison which one prisoner was carrying to hang himself when there would be an opportunity. I took the rope from him and talked to him, and did everything to make him feel human kindness.

61. * Recently one inmate was leaving prison and said: “Father, I will bring to you my wife, so that she may properly confess at least once in her life.” It’s interesting and strange that prior to their release, many prisoners come for their last confession. They want to say goodbye and give thanks for everything and leave prison with a pure soul. Also, before the parole commission or before leaving for a hospital, they go for confession and ask for assistance in their prayers. Sometimes it happens that in half a year or in a year or two, they return again to their beds, immediately run to confession, and begin their new life behind old bars.

62. * I was asking Oleksa to confess but he would ponder and say that he would go once released. He was released and within a year, we met again in prison. He could not look into my eyes but I called him to me and he confessed the sins of his entire life. He was sentenced to eight years for violent robbery and this affected him so much that he became a different person. How strange is it that such a tragedy was needed to humble a human before God. I always say: “do not stand on your knees before people because this is slavery, stand on your knees before God because this is freedom.” “Turn from evil and do good; strive for peace with all your heart.” (Psalms 34: 14).

63.

Glory to Jesus Christ!

Peace be with you Father Ihor! Somewhere deep in my heart, I feel despair and I know that only you are able to understand me. I was very much touched by your last sermon and especially the song “I am looking into the sky,” which you were singing after liturgy. Few could understand those tears but to me they gave a better understanding of your character. After all these years, I think that I am finally able to understand you. Lord! Father, if you only knew how grateful I am to you for all your teachings!

“Why God, have you not given me wings?” Why my God, have You not given me this wisdom? Dear God, I did not know humility and I came to know it. Lord, I did not know about light and I saw it. Dear God, I cannot sin anymore, for I have started drinking water from Your spring and I know that I will not be thirsty again. How difficult it is to remain true to oneself while staying in this evil world. You, Father, are like a life-buoy for me. I brought my brother for confession. Help him. With respect – Vadym.

* Vadym was seven times convicted and is only thirty-seven. Many times he would give me a list of medications which he wanted me to buy. Strong pills and drugs were twice listed. Luckily, the lady in the pharmacy brought my attention to this because otherwise I may have gotten into trouble. Despite such preoccupations, Vadym has grace from God because he was bringing people to confession. Once I asked him if his wounds on his legs had healed. “Yes” he said, “because I am carrying with me the soil from the grave of Charnetsky and I am praying to him.” In this strange way, the Lord is working in this world and He loves everyone.

64. * Lubomyr was doing time for the use and possession of drugs and got a stomach ulcer. He was always coming to church and confessed. Once he asked me to give him some oil because his stomach was aching. I gave him five hryvnas so that he could buy it himself. A policeman saw this and Lubomyr had to suffer a lot as a result. He was compelled to write a report stating that a priest gave him money. Of course, such things are forbidden, but five hryvnas is nothing. Still, the damage was great. Lubomyr was firm: better to die than to trip up the priest. “According to God, we must love all priests that are cleaning us with holy sacraments and praying for us. And we are supposed to respect our spiritual leaders more than angels.” (Saint Evagrius). After his release, Lubomyr came to his senses and returned to his family – he has two wonderful kids. He works as a driver and whenever he has some extra money, he comes to me and says: “Father, please buy something for the boys in prison.” This is a rare occurrence which speaks of Lubomyr’s high morality and this, from a former drug addict. Thus, a prisoner was ready to die for his priest and how many people in the church dispense dirt on their pastor? “To judge others is a shameless privatization of God’s right. To judge others is to destroy one’s soul. Do not judge even if you saw something with your own eyes, because they often deceive.” (Saint John Climacus).

65. Glory to Jesus Christ!

Father, I will be asking you to read this letter after liturgy to those who will be in church. I want to tell you how God helped me get home – 120 kilometres away without any money. To summarize my story, I was released on parole and given six hryvnas for transportation. I went to the bus station. I approached one bus driver and was refused. Another one said that without money, he was not going to be giving rides to prisoners. I had no other option but to go to the highway in the hope of hitchhiking. I walked three kilometres and nobody stopped. Then I said the “Our Father” and “Hail Mary.” I was walking and thanking God for my release, asking Him to help me get home safely. Then I heard a car coming to me. I turned my head and saw a taxi. I did not even raise my hands but the car stopped near me. The driver asked me if he was going in the right direction. I told him “yes” and asked him to give me a ride. I was honest with him and told him that I have no money. I even showed him the slip of paper proving my release from prison. The driver said that he does not give lifts to prisoners. I told him: “well then, have a nice day.” I stepped back from the car and then I heard him say: “get in quickly.” After a few seconds, I was already sitting by his side and in three hours I was home. I ask you Father, please tell the other inmates how God helped me. Nowadays, getting a 120 kilometre ride without being charged is fantastic! Only God can do such things!

The former convict Petro, whom you baptized on the feast of the Annunciation in 2002.

66. 05/11/2000 Dear Father Ihor! With gratitude and sincere greetings, I am writing a reply to your kind letter. I have received everything that you have sent me. I was unpacking the parcel with my own hands so please do not worry about anything. It's with pity that I look back at the times when I was not in correspondence with you. It's a good thing that there are people like you and I am proud of being able to write to you. This contact raises me in my own eyes and gives me hope for the better. The fact that you are writing such good books is a very useful thing. Very few people write and speak today about love. And he who has it in his heart does not know what fear is, what regret is, what despair is; he never gets angry, and the most important thing is that love gives almost endless wisdom. When you love, you do not hesitate; you always clearly see what is good and what is bad. And when I experienced its unearthly power on myself, it felt like the blinders fell off my eyes. Everything became clear in one moment.

You know, when I got trapped in the criminal world, I instantly put it for myself as an aim to remain a human. Various things happened. I got up and fell, did bad things, did good things, but only after one case did I realize that I had overcome the evil in me. For ten days, they were beating me with cudgels in the penalty isolator, day after day. Up until today, I still do not know why they kept me there and why they were beating me, but this is not important. I saw their twisted faces, the pleasure they were getting from someone who could not respond to the violence that they were practicing on me. They were misusing their power, endless power over another human being. It would seem that I should have started hating them, hating the state that is educating such scoundrels, even mothers who give birth to such humans, but I was gazing into my soul with wonder and surprise. I suddenly felt love and pity for them, "for they do not know what they are doing." Who did this to them? Zenoviy Krasivsky was right when he said:

Oh, human being, why aren't you a wild beast of prey,
That would rather die from hunger,
Than accept from an executioner the taste of a thrown bone!
If you learn how to live, you will know how to die.

I am not going to write now about the Soviet system of educating and other related things. All this is right, but wasn't it the same system that was educating me too, and were there no people like them in other times and in other places? It's an eternal struggle of good versus evil for human souls that will last for a long time in this world. And the struggle for one's own soul is part of the universal struggle. I completely threw away hatred from my heart and realized this only after the incident that I have described to you. Evil has no power over me because I love people and love God. I believe that He will not desert me and that in this battle I will not leave my place. We will win anyway! I will fulfill my mission prescribed to me in heaven. Now I am sure of this.

We will have to meet one day. I am dreaming (even though it is too early) about my release and about a trip to Yaremche to relax for at least one week. There is one little church there, the only one which I have ever entered and in which I felt connected to God. When serving liturgy, the priest would even close his eyes. For the first time I saw how from heart to heart a sermon of love was preached, a sermon of peace among people, a sermon of truth – our truth. I want to stand in this church again one day. Maybe then we will organize a round table, but sorry, I am still drinking black tea. I can't live without it, because sometimes it's my only source of vitamins. Maybe after my release I will give up drinking it, but so far...

At the end, I want to ask you about that little cross you sent me. Whose is it? I can see that someone was wearing it and for a long time. I cannot put it on because I am not baptized; this would be wrong I think. But I can assure you that it will not be lost. This is it and I have to finish. With your prayers I am now in the second group of the tuberculosis list. I have not been taking tuberculosis medicine for a whole year already. I cannot call it anything but a miracle. Pray for us. With respect, your friend for always – Yevhen from Kharkiv.

* My correspondence with Yevhen strengthened his Christian faith and with God's help, he was released to freedom. He came to me once and on January 9, 2002, he was baptized.

67. Christ is Born!

01/01/2003 *Viacheslav*. Father Ihor, all the others and I who are ill with tuberculosis here in the infirmary in Kherson region want to wish you happiness, the health which you are giving in your service to God, and thanks for the presents with which you are comforting the convicted of this prison. We are asking you to pray for us. Since the people of southern Ukraine are distant from religion, may they be forgiven by God. We feel God's special blessing in your Christmas prayers that will be taking place in our prison church every Sunday.

68. Glory to Jesus!

19/08/2002 Dear Father Ihor. I want to thank you for your intensive work that has not passed unnoticed and without consequences but has left in my heart a great feeling of grace and love to us, poor people. Through your lips and sermons I also opened my heart to God. Thank God, I am at home, healthy, and alive in my native land. I was released before the feast of our Saviour. Back in the camp, I dreamed of visiting St. George's Cathedral. When I entered the church, I prayed and felt God's grace. I thanked Our Lord for taking me alive and healthy from prison. My heart was filled with such sorrow that I cried and felt what a helpless and poor creature a human being is – God's creature that is nothing without Him. In church, I was praying near the grave of the holy Metropolitan Andrey whom I was asking for help during my entire imprisonment. With God's grace I had an opportunity to thank Sheptytsky for his protection. I myself Father, do not know how it happened, but thanks be given to God. I liked church very much.

I arrived home safely even though I was starving because our "beloved office" let me go barefoot, hungry, and did not give me a penny for the way home; they just said that if I wanted to, I will get home on foot. I reached the Chernihiv area safe and sound and on Sunday I was at home. I went to church on a holy day; it was the day when they bless apples. I liked the liturgy. Everything was fine but we missed your sermon through which the Lord himself is indeed speaking to us and giving us strength. I am grateful to you Father for this again, and may the Lord bless you. Only old ladies and little children go to church here. I was here, so to say, a specimen who has just got out of prison. And indeed, your sermons for me did not pass without an end result, they remained in my heart. And at home everything is like it was: they drink vodka around the clock and there does not seem to be any light at the end of the tunnel. I do not even look at the vodka, nor do I smell it. I want to be, as you said, above this evil. I am praying to God so that I do not fall and I am asking you to pray for me too. Prayer is indeed a great power which I myself experienced with God's grace. This is where I will be finishing my little letter. I think that it would be impolite of me to not thank you for the love which you are giving to save at least one soul and to put him on the right track. Thank you for your help Father Ihor.

With great respect and love for you – Maxym.

October 2002. Dear Father Ihor, I have received the letter from you for which I am very grateful. I also received the photograph and the newspaper clips. I am very happy that these years that I have spent in prison were not in vain. If not for prison, I would have never known what God's grace is. When I became free, I got a passport and went to Moscow for work. There I was going to church every Sunday. We were working without any time off but I was still going after work to attend the Vespers. This probably gave me the strength to go on, for many times I was reaching despair. Sometimes I quit the job, saying that I will never come back again. There are a lot of churches in Moscow and when I was walking depressed and overridden with grief, I would always come to a church. I would pray to God and I do not know myself what was happening then. The next day, I would go to work with joy as if nothing had happened. I was very happy that God was helping me overcome my suffering. And now I am happy that everything is alright. After the holidays I want to go there again because I have got nothing to do at home. Half a year has passed since I became free but I have not drunk one shot and I am not smoking ever since. I am already thirty-five, want to get married, but I need to have my own

house and in Moscow one cannot earn much. I think that I am already on the right way with both your help and God's help. I am therefore asking you to help me emigrate abroad to earn some money. Some relatives want to sell me a house for 3000 and I think that in one season I can earn this amount. Father, I know that if God got me out of this mud and gave me His only Begotten Son, then He would give me all the rest too. I am praying for you every morning and evening. May the Lord protect you and help you in your good deeds. With great appreciation for you – Maxym.

January 2003. Dear Father Ihor. I am grateful to you for the letter in which you wrote to me about your help with finding work in Kyiv. When I had read the letter from you, it gave me more strength and boosted my morale. Thank God that due to such circumstances, I met you – a man who was really sent by God to us, sinful people. As the Bible says, the Lord's ways are mysterious and God's will is in everything. In all my prayers I pray for you. May the Lord bless you with health, strength, endurance, and may your work receive God's blessing. After that school where I spent ten years, to work here in freedom is very difficult. There is a completely different mentality here and one has to show initiative which for me is most difficult. Every Sunday, I go to church and when I have some free time, I go and thank God for getting me out of this mess which I found myself in. I also ask God in my prayers to give me more endurance and patience.

I do not know how things will work out to be, but in my mind, I have to get married and have a family, for I am already at that stage in my life. At home, very nice people want to help me with finding a place to live. They see that I am not drinking and smoking, they cannot even believe that I have changed for the better. Until I was thirty, I lived and did not know that a human being by himself cannot do anything because God's will is in everything. Sometimes, it so happens that because of varying circumstances, I cannot go to church on Sunday and this makes me feel bad and guilty. I feel that I am lacking something and I cannot even express it in words. There are such circumstances when it is very difficult and it seems like there is no way out. Then I pray and everything turns out for the better. I came to confession for the first time in the labour camp and I would have never probably said the things I said, but some kind of power, probably God's will, opened my heart and my mouth. I am grateful to Jesus Christ for finding me and saving me. It's not me who came to God, but the Lord in His great grace saved me I think, leading me now in this life. You also played a monumental role in this and it was through your sermons that the Lord opened my stony heart. I am currently missing your sermons in which there is really God's power. I wish you Father Ihor, health and God's blessing. Write to me, I will be waiting for a response. With great respect for you – Maxym.

69. Christ is risen!

20/05/2003 *Oles, born in 1966.* Dear Father Ihor! I am sincerely grateful to you for your letter and your spiritual support. It is very important to have some comfort and good advice amidst these horrible conditions where they are trying to break not only the body, but also the soul, and turn you into a beast incapable of thinking and striving for more. Only faith and hope for God's grace can rescue one from this as well as a good word of support from a friend. In difficult moments, I find comfort not only in prayers but also in your "treasure box of wisdom." Thank you for giving me a good and useful book. Everything will change and things are not always going to be like this. I hope that I will overcome this way of suffering without losing my faith in the idea and love to my neighbours. During these three years I have experienced a lot – the pain of loss, desperation from betrayals, and despair from helplessness in the struggle with the system.

However, I never had the slightest thought about leaving the road of the soldier of the nation, about giving up on the idea or giving in to scoundrels. Death does not scare me. May those who rob the nation, mock the helpless, judge unfairly, and betray, be afraid of it. A soldier and a Christian must seek death and overcome it, or meet it with a smile. In the long run, the one who is perishing in the struggle for the nation and faith has to be in paradise. Is that correct? I know that God sent me these ordeals for my sins because sometimes I was doing things which I am now ashamed of. One has to change his way of living and align it with the demands of Christian morality. May God give you power to carry the light of faith and hope to the bereaved and to cure sick souls.

Goodbye, with respect, a slave of God – Oles.

Glory to Jesus Christ!

06/07/2003 I am sincerely grateful to you for the good books and kind words, especially for the little icon and the rosary. Every day, I ask the Lord to give me wisdom and patience because for a couple of times each day, my hand reaches out for a weapon. Will I be able to get to the end of my sentence without being forced to start all over again? – I do not know. I sincerely envy your parishioners – inmates who have a good pastor and the opportunity of obtaining spiritual comfort, confession, and wise advice. I unfortunately, can only receive these things from books and my written correspondences with you. Even this is very helpful.

When one remembers the suffering of Christ, the suffering of the knights of spirit and faith who suffered for the Church and Ukraine, my own problems suddenly seem tiny and my pain appears to be just a tickle. I understand that people who were more honourable and righteous were carrying their cross in the same way as I am and that their way and cross were heavier. All is in the hands and will of God even though by human standards, I was convicted unfairly and unlawfully. I see this as the punishment for my other sins, sins that came not before people, but before the Lord. Give me God, only the ability to endure this punishment and not to lose myself and my soul.

I am of Cossack origin, only my mother survived among my relatives. I finished school, continued my education, but then they sentenced me to prison. Then I was taken to the army. I was begging to go to Afghanistan but was not chosen. I was serving in the intelligence service. It wasn't as bad as the Zabaikal army but there were still a lot of problems, especially when 70% of the contingent was Asian. My good preparation (a candidate for a master's degree in judo) and the spirit of a Donbas rowdy saved me. I was also not afraid to take a weapon into my hands, for I had already been behind bars. When I took it, I already knew how to use it.

I was released and got married but I did not have a church wedding. I was again sentenced to prison for two years on charges of theft. After my release, I became interested in politics and showed too much initiative for the eastern areas of the Soviet Union. They once left me with a weapon and I was sentenced to two more years. After this I completed one year at the history department and was again arrested. They gave me six years this time. It was a circus, not a trial! Our forefathers were 100 times right when they said: "your freedom and right are on the edge of your sword." But God's will is in everything. I have to go through what is ascribed to me and take what is most useful for the soul, brain, and body.

I can be happy about one thing – the beginning of my wife's free life. No matter how I tried to convince her at one point, she still did not want to have a church wedding. Because of this I could not go to confession and Communion. Now I only have to wait for three years and then I will have an opportunity to cleanse my soul. How difficult it is for me to carry the burden of dirty sins that have accumulated over these years. And now, the very thought of future cleansing brings me relief. In this way, even with everyday problems, one may find happiness. The second useful thing is that I have found out who is who among my friends. And the third useful thing is that I have enough time and inspiration to think about my life and my actions. And how it will be later – we'll see, but the way is already chosen and we cannot bypass it, for there are things that are more important than our personal freedom or life.

From what you have sent, the "Testament of Patriarch Josyf Slipyj" left a strong impression on me. What a giant spirit! With such people, God is awarding the nation and our duty is to be worthy of such gifts. The Akathist to the Holy Trinity is also wonderful. Thank you. I am reading it every Sunday along with the liturgy of St. John the Chrysostom. This is what I have instead of going to liturgy. I read and pray as if I have been to church. Here, apart from us, nobody else is allowed to enter, even the Muscovite fathers are avoiding us.

From your works I very much liked "Slaves! Wake Up!", "Call to the Unconquerable," articles about the martyr Josaphat, Karmaliuk, Father Fedorov, "The Patriarchate, or Slavery Again," and the soccer report. The article about the RGCC¹⁰¹ was a big surprise for me. Others and I were interested in

¹⁰¹ Russian Greek Catholic Church.

the book about the beatified Bishop Mykola Charnetsky. Indeed, there is a great need to promote our own saintly wonderworkers because we know about such people from abroad but we do not know about our own saints.

In this respect, I have a great request to ask of you. One Evangelist is sitting here by my side but he has a true faith in Christ, one that is not hypocritical. The guy has been tortured with hemorrhoids. He and I are praying to the Miraculous Mykola for his recovery. I am asking you to pray in this intention too on the grave of Charnetsky and if possible, please send us some holy soil too.

Father, I am asking you to answer a couple of questions for me. First, I have some sins in my soul which are not giving me peace and because of them probably, I am endlessly punishing myself here. The realization of my misdeed before God, my great sorrow, and the full repentance of those shameful deeds have been scorching me for more than one year already. But there is no possibility to confess and receive forgiveness in the near future. So I was wondering if I can make a confession in written form (of course, taking into account censorship) and be free at least from part of this burden?

Second. Judas punished himself because he understood that he had done evil. His contemporary followers are not doing this anymore because they do not have a conscience, honour, and a fear of God. Thus, can we help them to comprehend the shame of their deeds and take the necessary decision that is dignified of their predecessor? Or, shall we wait until Judgment Day and carelessly watch their immoral activity?

In this respect, I have certain arguments with some friends because our views on this question are diametrically opposite. And what do you, as a spiritual person, think? This is all for now. May God give you health, strength, success, and inspiration in your difficult but so necessary work. May the Lord and the Virgin Mary protect you and help you in the realization of your plans. Goodbye. With respect – God’s slave, Oles.

18/10/2003 I am grateful to you for the troubles and help! Thank God, finally something which I have been dreaming about for four years has happened! Yesterday the priest came to whom you wrote and I had an opportunity to confess. What a relief and what a joy for the soul, as if the burden I was carrying with me during all those years evaporated. What a pleasure it is to be free of that feeling of dirt in the soul, to atone for my misdeeds before God and to hear that He forgives me and presents me with a new opportunity for a new life.

When I was reading before confession “Heavenly King,” I felt how a warm wave was slowly covering me. And when I confessed, I sensed pain and sadness, shame and a constant feeling of warmth, as if there was darkness around and a ray of light falling onto my heart. And when I received forgiveness and accepted the holy body and blood of Jesus Christ, I cannot express this feeling of happiness, indeed a blessing! To feel this one really has to wait many years and desire this. One more time I am expressing my gratitude to you Father Ihor, and to all who have been working for the salvation of my sinful soul.

Everything went well for me. Today they declared that in the nearest future they are going to kick me out of here by amnesty. I am praying to God, God’s Mother, and Mykola Charnetsky for this to happen. May God give you health and success in your work. Goodbye. With respect – Oles.

05/11/2003 Thanks for a good letter and for the prayers. I have passed the trial and soon will be free. They are going to be spinning my head for one more week but the most important thing is that my reconciliation with God happened and that I am now ready to face God’s judgment, though with trepidation, for I am sinful, but with hope and in faith. You are advising me to choose the way to the monastery. I might do this in the future but probably not now because I have many things to finish and I have my duty before those whom I gave oaths on the Bible. I did not have the right to skip the way of the warrior, because this is exactly what those who fight against us want. When I believe that I have done everything possible in my situation for the nation, then I will feel peace to accept a monastic life. Yes, it’s good advice and a better way, but someone has to hold the sword, not only the cross, to be able to protect that cross. Everything has its time. I hope to meet you soon, we will talk and give thanks

loved and that with time love fades away. That is simply not true! It's living in my heart, I can feel it, and problems only make it bigger and unite us. We go together against the stormy wind which is this world.

At the very beginning of our life together, Christopher started drinking with his friend at work. He would return home late and would smell of vodka. I made a big deal about it. I said: "either me or alcohol!" He asked for forgiveness and we went to church, so that there he would take an oath before God and the priest to not drink for a whole year. And to my surprise, at church he said that he would not drink for two years. I got scared and started thinking about what may happen if he does not keep his promise. He did. In January, two years passed. He works hard but does not go to liturgy, just like me. He is a believer but not a practicing one. This is a Polish way of describing such people. But there is a great guilt from the side of the priests-Pharisees for such a situation because they are preaching one thing and then drive BMWs and live in luxurious villas. They are also believers but not practicing ones...

Christopher and I had plans of going to church on Sunday. Not for confession (I was not given forgiveness even though I tried), we will go to pray. I do not care about how the priests live and what people do. For me, God is most important and even though he may not be fulfilling all of my wishes, he is always ready to listen to me and if I am attentive, He will give me a piece of advice about what to do in order to find joy again. I believe that God is good and I am not scared of Him. I believe that God values sincerity and not deceit. And I do believe that despite my life, He knows that I love Him! You may ask why I have written all this to you. I will answer: "I do not know if I could in any confession express so many feelings as I did in this letter." We are having hard times now because of human foulness. I am asking you to pray for our sins. I beg you, if I am blind, may the Lord open my eyes, and if I am deaf, let Him tell me what I have not been able to hear. May He not abandon us, like children who are lost in the forest. Maybe I am not worthy to ask Him of this... Maybe He will listen to you?

But only tell me the truth, you, who in many ways are an example for me – have you ever thought why there is such calamity in Ukraine? Why this wonderful land has always been imprisoned? Tell me, can you accept everything with humility without demanding justice? You who said once: "a calf may be sucking on two cows, but I am a human – I want the truth!" I am watching TV every day. What is happening in Ukraine? I am praying for all of you. This injustice must come to an end one day. May the Lord bless every step on its way to justice!

I value you for saying things which you believe in. I am waiting for your reply. I believe that you will be sincere with me, just like I am with you. Your opinion means a lot to me. And one more thing... It's important to me. Say hello from me to your prisoners. Loneliness among people is captivity and the most horrible thing that happens to us. Tell them that one may be in freedom and feel like an inmate, and one may be sitting locked up with seven locks and feel free. This is what I wish for them. Why? Because the majority of them have not done even half of the sins that people living in lavishness and comfort have done.

I think you understand me better than anyone else because we are both Sagittarians according to the horoscope. I hope you will help me with some advice and that in your simple words I will find the wisdom which I lack. Be careful! I am now coming down from the clouds to earth. I want you to marry us! Khrystyk was baptized in the Roman Catholic Church and he will take a baptismal certificate from his parish. I do not know anything about my certificate because I was baptized in the Orthodox Church because I needed to do this to become a godmother. I entered the Catholic Church by myself – this was my choice, owing a lot to you. You will remain my priest for ever. I believe in one God, Son, and the Holy Spirit, and in God's Mother, the Virgin Mary! Amen. I am looking forward to receiving a reply from you! May God bless you! Unworthy – Angela.

20/12/2003 Dear Father Ihor! Many thanks to you from Christopher and I for your help. We got married on November 8. We are alright. Christopher is getting better already and I have not been affected by any illness. Somewhere in my body there is my little virus. It is being nice to me and has not yet eaten up my liver. The only thing is that he is quite capricious and picky with food. He does not like garlic, fried and greasy food. And who would think, he is such an abstinent and does not like beer!

And I do like all those things! This is what it means to coexist with a whimsical creature. I am seeking compromise. One day I'll have a beer, a cutlet, and a pack of cigarettes and another day, pills for the liver and semolina. And things are alright!

I am working at the autumn fair from 8:30 until 10:00 pm. I am learning about computers and I am also going to start learning English. I started taking classes in order to work in the future with drug addicts. I have experience, so why not use it to help others? In January, I am planning to visit my mom and I would like to see you. Tell your prisoners that there are people who are losing everything – from their material goods to their right to live. Still, they live and fight with God's help. The main thing in life is to have a clear conscience and to not be ashamed of looking into the mirror. Only this can give comfort in a harsh hour. See you! Warm greetings from Christopher. Yours – Angela.

71. * On Palm Sunday in 2003, around 150 people came for liturgy. After liturgy, I asked to let through for confession those who have never been confessed before, and especially the murderers. I thought that there would be some fifteen persons but there came around fifty prisoners! I almost wobbled, for I was pressed for time and had only three hours (from 9 am until 12 pm) and there was only one hour left. Well, I thought, even if I have to die I will confess all of them. I confessed and gave Communion to ten to fifteen people at the same time and then asked them to step back so that there was order. Most of them were convicted for a murder, and two of them committed two. Interestingly, I heard the drug addicts say for the first time that they had driven others to this addiction and that these people have already passed away. They were calling themselves murderers and they were tortured by their conscience. I confessed everyone, left the prison, and feel that I was drifting away out of fatigue while being intoxicated from happiness. I came home, fell down in the form of a cross and thanked God for the souls. For one single day like that, it was worth being born into this world!

72. * I was deeply moved by one man who had committed some unbelievable things – something out of a horror movie. Some were advising me not to have anything to do with him and I knew that he would not go to any other priest apart from me and that I have to lead him to confession. This cost me one month of sleepless nights, health, and many other things. When things could have no longer been more chaotic, I suggested him to put me at risk in order to undo the Satanic possession. I was bracing for the worst...

And exactly at that point he came at last for confession. Then I saw God's hand in this matter and the Lord showed me the price for the salvation of one soul. It seemed to me that I was in purgatory for a month, as if my soul was burning. I remembered that I have already been praying daily for ten years in order to repent for my horrible sins and crimes already here, on earth, in order not to suffer in purgatory after death, not to mention hell. And if I knew beforehand that I would have to suffer so much, I would have never in my life committed those sins!

I could have had a heart attack because my left hand was already refusing to function, but I was still surrendering myself completely into the hands of God. Meditations were the most helpful for me. I agreed to take everything that God was sending me – endurance, suffering, and even death. May not my will but God's be done in everything, under the Protection of the Virgin Mary and through the protection of my heavenly protectors. I was also feeling great help from the fact that the blind and paralyzed were praying for me, as well as other good people. And the fact that long ago I was consciously helping out poor people turned out for me today to be a strong shield of their prayers. Can there be something nicer in the world than having a blind or paralyzed person praying for you?! Thus, it is worthwhile to do a lot of good today, for we do not know what tomorrow will bring.

73. Purgatory

* "A gift has grace in the sight of every man living; and for the dead detain it not." (Ecclesiasticus 7: 33).

One Franciscan monk fell ill with a lingering and painful disease. Feeling that he was becoming a burden for others, he asked God to shorten his sufferings. The ill one was heard and an angel

appeared to him, and he suggested making a choice between death and three days of atoning in purgatory and one year of a difficult disease after which he would immediately go to heaven. The monk chose the first. After the first couple of hours spent in purgatory, he felt horrible pains and he had the impression of being there already for many years. The angel who visited him suggested that if he regretted it, he should return to the body that was not buried yet. The monk accepted this proposal and after one year of sufferings died, going after this straight to heaven (Vaginudus, *The Chronicles of the Brothers Minor* 1283). “One hour in purgatory equals twenty years of difficult sufferings on earth.” (from the visions of Mary Anna Lindmayer).

St. Augustine, the bishop and teacher of the Church says: “since it is said ‘but he himself shall be saved, as if you had escaped through fire’ (1 Corinthians 3: 15), nobody cares anymore about the fire. And still everyone shall be saved only through fire, and that fire will be more scorching than anything that a human being can endure in this world.” “Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.” (Matthew 12: 32). This is a description of purgatory in which sins are forgiven, the sins that are atoned for already in the other world.

The Lord said to St. Mechtilda: “come over here and have a look at the person who is the most wretched of all, from him you can learn about my kindness.” Mechtilda was taken to heaven and saw a dignified man who was dressed like royalty; he was in his blooming age, his face was glorious, beautiful, shining and unbelievably freedom-loving. Mechtilda asked him who he was and how he had achieved such joy and such splendour. To this the man replied: “on earth I was a brigand and a criminal. But since I was committing crimes out of my ignorance by following the habit inherited from my parents and not out of anger, I have achieved mercy through my repentance and atonement. But I was in purgatory for 100 years and underwent a great deal of suffering before I achieved full cleansing. Now, thanks to God’s kindness which I do not deserve, I have been granted an eternal gift in heaven.”

74. 13/06/2004 Father Ihor! I have already been released and I want to thank God for giving us, sinful people, such priests like you. And I also thank you for your kindness, mercy, grace, and love; thanks for not looking down on us, prisoners, but instead giving us a part of your life. You are helping us in this world to find the true road that leads to salvation and eternal happiness. May the Lord give you true heavenly wisdom, health, and a better destiny and may He add more years to your life so that you continue to direct lost lambs to the House of God. And personally, I am thanking you from the bottom of my heart for the grace that you have shown me.

Two times convicted and a murderer – Markiyan.

75. 17/06/2004 *Vaclav, born in 1968*. I had done time for sixteen years. At the age of three, I found myself in a children’s home because my mom and dad were imprisoned. Ever since that time, life was throwing me from one asylum to another, from one boarding school to another. I was convicted for the first time at the age of seventeen, exactly on my birthday. When I was released, I got right back to doing what I had done before. My background is Polish and knowing the language, I would say that I was from abroad. I was taking money from people, promising to bring them goods and then vanish. I was robbing apartments and sometimes even people. And again on my birthday at the age of twenty-two, I was imprisoned and sentenced to four years. After the release, in four months, my friend and I set off to rob an apartment. Neighbours heard noise in the apartment and called the police. I went down along the lightning-rod and could escape but my friend grabbed the TV cable and fell down. He fell and broke both his legs and hurt his spine. The fractures were open and he was bleeding. I came back and took him to the cellar. There the police found us.

I was sentenced to nine years and my friend was sent to a psychiatric hospital for testing. And so for this, I went alone to prison and I am not upset because my friend is constantly helping me all the time. He did not forsake me in prison, and this is a big rarity here. In prison I fell ill with a skin disease that has been torturing me for five years already. And quite recently, I have been staying in the sanitary department for a month and could not even get up from bed. There was not a healthy spot on me and the doctors were thinking that I was not going to survive. Then they brought Father Ihor to me. He

baptized me and gave me Holy Communion. I do not know what happened but God sent His grace to me through Father Ihor. Just imagine: for one month I could not get up from bed, my body was bleeding, itching, and festering, and two days after baptism and Communion I was already checked out of the sanitary department. This miracle helped me to come to Jesus and since that time, I go to liturgy every Sunday. The Lord loves us because we are His children and He gave His life for us on the cross, on Golgotha. I believe that the Lord will help me in life to become a different person.

76. Glory to Jesus Christ!

22/06/2004 Mr. Father, sorry for the delay but the reason for my silence was rather banal – I did not have an envelope. The scenery here is wonderful but there are lots of downsides. They are feeding us poorly, Saturday is a working day, bedtime is at 10 pm all the time, and Sunday does not differ much from other days. The only thing is that on Sundays we have a sauna. I only saw a priest once here, when I was in quarantine. Frankly speaking, I miss you, liturgy, and I “serve” by myself. I am sending my boys to the sauna and I myself stand before the icon and read from the book of prayers. You know, if someone looked at me from aside he would probably say that I am nuts, but I do not care... Every day in my prayers I remember you, because you and no one else have put me on the right track. And may you not worry that I may go astray, for I am always trying to keep my word. I think you have come to know me during these six years, and in general, I have sat for ten years and was twice convicted.

I am working well and I have received encouragement which is bringing me little joy. Here, prisoners are going to so-called “counteragent” jobs in other cities and villages. And I am striving to get there but the authorities are afraid of sending the severes¹⁰² after us. I have not received any news from my cousins for some reason. I can understand them because my mom was for them a bit more than just an ordinary aunt. And on the other hand, I am not at ease in my soul for having done something like this...No matter what I do, the soul feels bitter and heavy inside. I am guilty of everything.

Thank you Mr. Father for going to the head to ask for me because my article is heavy and such convicts are usually not allowed to settle. But this means that some people in a prison uniform also believe in God and take the priest’s opinion into account. May you be happy! Good health to you! A great sinner and prisoner – Stepan.

77. August 2004. Viktor, born in 1969. When I was three, my mother and father divorced. I was going to a kindergarten and then my father sent me to a boarding school. On weekends, my grandma would take me home and every Sunday we went with her to church. After boarding school I went to college, and there my life as a thief began. In 1987, I stole two cars. I was sentenced to half a year in prison, and three years probation. After my release, I got acquainted with a girl who started having huge requests. I returned to my previous ways and was again sentenced to three years in a maximum security prison. In 1992, my friends suggested that I go to Poland for work. When all the documents were already prepared, I found that we were going to steal. It was too late to refuse. The work consisted of robbing wallets from people’s pockets and I was quite good at this. A happy life began. We went to steal in Hungary, Moscow, St. Petersburg, because people with big money live there. I was leading a lenient life – vodka, women, and money. Those were my only interests at that time even though I would go to church whenever I could. I caused trouble to a lot of people which I currently regret and am asking God for His forgiveness.

Once I saw on the streetcar a man who was sleeping and holding a bag in his hands. I sat beside him, took the bag, and got off the streetcar. When I opened the bag, I saw 300 dollars and some documents. In a week I decided to give back the documents for fifty dollars. The man said that he had nothing to pay me with because he borrowed 300 dollars for a funeral and even this money was stolen. I gave back the documents but I could not give the money because by that time I had spent it already. I felt very guilty inside because not long before that, I buried my grandma and father on borrowed money.

¹⁰² The ones who were previously doing time in a maximum security prison.

Another time at night I snatched a bag from a lady and ran away. When I opened it, I saw a golden wedding ring and a rosary with a cross. My hands trembled and I thought that for this sin the Lord will punish me severely. And so it happened. I took that rosary, hung it on a fence, made the sign of the cross, and went home. Next day, I drank with the money I got for the wedding ring and again I went to steal. I took 1000 hryvnas from a man and in fifteen minutes, was caught and sentenced to four years. The Lord punished me severely for all my sins; He took my relatives, my apartment, my wife, and eventually put me in prison. This was going to happen sooner or later because one cannot go on living like that. I do not want to do time anymore. I am thirty-five and I have to come to my senses. Old age will ask me: "Viktor, where was your youth, what have you done for the people?" I believe that God will help me stand on the right track but for this happen, one has to start from the very beginning and be born again.

78.

Christ is Born!

09/01/2003 *Severyn*. I am sincerely grateful to you Father Ihor for passing on to me your "fables" which I read with pleasure and use for myself. I did not expect to see you in such a light. Our views regarding faith and our homeland and history completely coincide and I am ready to sign under each word of yours. Such people used to gather at my father's place. They cared about the destiny of Ukraine and more than once suffered for their views. It's a pity that my reputation is completely ruined and that I will never become a public defender of the homeland. But there are many ways for me to make myself useful. I agree that one must try everything and then see if I am ready to break with the world and live according to the Lord's instructions. Of course, things have not been easy for me. My biggest dream is to establish a periodical to attract the attention of the public to this category of our countrymen. Recently, I received a letter from one village which said that on Vatican Radio, they read my old article from the "Missionary" periodical about how we celebrated Easter in jail. People reacted and became interested because the surname of one villager was mentioned on the air. Now this person is free and the once hostile attitude towards him no longer persists. I am certain that there will be enough correspondences for such periodicals.

On the feast day of St. Nicholas, the fathers from the monastery of the Redemptorists collected money in the church for gifts in our prison. Such attention on their part shocked everyone. It was initiated by Father Dr. Bohdan Dziurakh – a man of incredible spiritual purity and great faith. There were letters with wishes from unknown people that just amazed us with their love and openness. And we, scoundrels, used to do harm to those people, and brought them a lot of misery... Thank God, we had a liturgy on Christmas day. The concert of boys who were invited by the Basilian Fathers was just wonderful.

Your article entitled "From the Ruin of the Rite to the Ruin of the Church and Nation" interested me a great deal. There is a lot to think about, but all this has to be spoken about regularly so that the clergy reaches one common opinion. I passed your wishes to the people and distributed the literature. I am trying not to waste my time. I will be happy if you again pass on the same kind of literature. I wish you success in your creative work, health, patience and protection from God's Mother.

Long live Ukraine! With love, your sincere servant – Severyn.

April 2003. As long as I can remember, I have had so much trouble with the police. Everything started in the late 1960's when I was taken from the village and my mother's parents where I was being raised for a couple of years. They were trying to turn a plain village boy into someone extraordinary. As my dad would say, they were raising me following the example of Nicolo Paganini. I started running away from home. Things went so far that one time they would catch me in Kyiv, and then in Moscow, and in other cities of the former Soviet Union. It began with stealing food and finished with me sitting in prison for more than twenty years...

I first thought about the meaning of life at the age of thirty-seven when I was in my cell and under arrest. For some reason, it seemed to me that all my expectations regarding a careless life had perished. For all my violations of the law, investigators promised me no less than ten years in a

maximum security prison. And they were right. In this very cell I screamed to God: “Lord, what shall I do in order not to perish here?!” It was late fall, dark clouds covered the sky, it was cold and uncomfortable, tears were running down my face. At that moment, the clouds dissolved and rays of sunlight entered the humid and stinky cell through the thick bars. It truly seemed that the Lord Himself gave me a sign, embraced me, and touched my cold heart. I was shocked with this vision that I did not believe it and thought – it is just a coincidence. Feeling more courage, I carefully addressed heaven, was this really the sign for me? And again rays of sunlight pierced through the darkness of the cell, as if answering my question, melting to the end the frost of my mistrust in the Heavenly Father. Since that time during difficult moments of my life in prison, I feel the support of Our Lord Jesus Christ who is directing, instructing, enduring in His patience and even with the love of a father, and rebuking me, His not so obedient son. I do not blame my destiny because God meant things to be the way they are. I am carrying my cross with my teeth clutched firmly. I have got an example, a confessor of the faith, Patriarch Josyf Slipyj. I have someone to follow! Glory to the Lord for ever and ever. Amen.

Christ is Risen!

06/05/2003 Dear Father Ihor! I have received your letter. Thanks for the greetings. You are right Father, that to put up with an enemy and not only an enemy, one has to learn. Every somber Christian is probably having these dilemmas – to tolerate or not? To some extent, you are in my skin and that’s why you know that being surrounded by such criminals, I, as a believer, must suffer in a particular way. But believe me that for me this is not so important anymore and it seems like the old man is slowly dying in me. I have got here some people who are making attempts to stand on the right way of the truth and to tolerate whatever comes their way – for them this is a big problem. We are all learning although this is difficult and unusual in this environment where evil and cynicism are concentrated.

You know, for the first time this year we had the ceremony of bringing out the shroud of Christ. The administration listened to our request although it was a business day. I myself did the artwork and made the design even though I did not have any paint. And so I had to do it with a pen on white cloth. But the very fact that all went fine, that they understood our request, is amazing. I was on duty on the stage by the shroud of Christ until Saturday evening. Many people came, around 300, and even some from the administration. On Easter we had a liturgy. Father Dr. Bohdan Dziurakh was serving it. He organized everything in such a way that it is difficult to put it in words; he is indeed a man of God. Also the monks, brothers Hryhoriy Palyha and Vitaliy Kotyk, are helping us a great deal. They make for good priests.

I wish you strong health and may the Lord help you!

25/12/2003 Dear Father, I am writing to you after our meeting. Let me thank you again for finding the time to visit us, scoundrels and sinners. Your speech or teaching went well with the audience because all are thirsty for the truth. You were telling everything with such simplicity that you immediately became one of us. We are lacking exactly that kind of priest because our Father is a good and godly person but he is too soft. He is more suitable for working with children. Here one sometimes needs to cut living flesh and not lisp with devoted sinners. Sometimes we need someone to talk to us in our own tongue and only then to preach about Jesus! You are successful in this and this immediately yields a big harvest. I personally expected something like this, for I knew about you already but I was still a bit lost. I want to say one thing: we have to learn how to confess the right way and for this we need soul-catchers. I am endlessly surprised to see you and your vitality.

Dear Father, I just cannot understand why you decided to take special care of me, for what did I do to deserve such treatment? You should not trust our brother at all, because he will for sure let you down and cause trouble to himself and others around him. I am probably not better than him, maybe in some things even worse. I am just trying to work on my sinful character with God’s help and make my will concordant with the will of Christ. Your correspondence with me played a considerable role in my consciousness. Sincerely grateful to you – Severyn.

30/12/2004 Dear Father Ihor! For a couple of months, I have been in the labour camp but have come here at a dark hour as there is no priest and nobody is interested in us at all. Still, with God's providence, I found myself in a monastery and met Father Yosyf Budai. They greeted us warmly; my friends in uniform were even surprised by this. Everyone was pleasantly surprised. I found myself in a church for the first time in eight years and I could not soak in all of its beauty. I shared our prisoners' problems with Father Yosyf and he joyfully agreed to help us. He has already come on two occasions to give Services. Without any hesitation, Father Yosyf said that I should study to become a priest. This shocked everyone, especially me. He insisted that I have to work with the inmates because I know their lives very well and can find a common language with them better than anyone else. I did not know how to reply and what to do. Shall I try to stand on such a difficult and responsible road? I would like to hear your opinion.

Unfortunately, under these circumstances, nobody needs our spiritual growth because Bolshevik laws are still in effect. It is as if time has stood still here since the years of Stalin and chaos is raging uncontrollably. It's a pity because human destinies are being destroyed, crushed, and broken right to the end. Every morning I say my prayers on the rosary and in the evening, I read the Akathists to everyone and look forward to God's help. How are your sheep? Be healthy! Faithfully – Severyn.

14/02/2005 Dear Father Ihor, the joy of release has overwhelmed my feelings. I dove into the new world as if jumping into cold water at my own risk. I was making my way through the crowds of people and feeling pleasure from the fact that I do not need to look back in fear. Is it real that I can finally feel like a human being? Is this the end to all the humiliations and mockery? During all those years, they were trying to make animals out of us and unfortunately, they were often successful. This punitive system only infuriated us more instead of changing us for the better. Now I am scared to death and feel secure only when I am locked in my house.

My mother has at last seen her worthless son exactly on her seventieth birthday! I came home like a gift. I am afraid of going out on the street because there the environment is alien to me and the movement, strange. There is anxiety and restlessness in my heart. The only thing that really brought me joy was meeting my thirteen year-old daughter. She was sincerely happy about meeting me and in the central square of town, she wrapped herself around my neck paying no attention to anyone. I was in church with my daughter. Finally I have lived to see such an event! I am asking Father, for your help in prayer, and thanks for everything that you have done for me. May the Lord help you! Severyn.

79. Greetings

14/10/2001 We greet Father Ihor on the tenth anniversary of his work in God's field. We bow before you Father, for your love to God and the people, for your sincere heart; for devoting your entire soul to spiritual work, and association with prisoners. Bring the word of God to these people who are looking forward to you! Happiness, health, and many happy years to you! With love to you – the convicts of the maximum security prison.

Dear Father Ihor!

16/12/2002 Greetings to you on your birthday. Health to you, happiness, and may carry your sweet cross in suffering because you, Mr. Ihor, are worthy of God's grace! Pray to God for us and with your prayers may our souls be saved. – Friends from the maximum security prison.

Do not hide behind the cloud, a star, –
Send your ray onto the earth,
Smile to Father Ihor,
So that all grief is lost.

May the scorching tear not touch
His soul, his eyes.
May mountains not stand in his way,
Because he has respect from people.

Warm with the warmth from heaven,
Our Father and his family,

O, God, Highest Lord,
Give grace to the priest, –

Take away the thick fogs of sadness,
So that he could have joy from his life.

To pray for us, sinners,
And to praise You, the Most Holy!

Dear Father Ihor!

14/10/2003 On the occasion of this wonderful feast day, let us Father, greet you. Let us tell you our words of gratitude because with you we are in joy and peace. May your destiny be kind to you, let the Holy Mother protect you. May your angel lead you to holy things and may the Lord grant you sound health. Joy, pleasure, endless happiness, and grace from Jesus for many years.

Father Ihor!

16/12/2003 I greet you on the occasion of your birthday. I wish you sound health, peace in your home, and warmth; may the Lord protect you and send you joy and all that is good. All the best to you in your difficult work. With respect to you, the once disruptive Luka.

Jesus Christ, Our Lord!

16/12/2003 I bend my knees before You and Your heaven. Deep in my heart, I am grateful to You for Your warrior whom You sent to earth for us, into the most unpleasant place on earth, to the sinners who are in prison. He is a warrior and a doctor, an advisor, and a brother! He is a model and a commander for us whom he is liberating from the enemy's captivity. He is our priest, Father Ihor!

Today is the day when he came into this world. Therefore, I am happy and rejoicing in my heart. I ask for Your blessing on his uneasy road. I believe that You will hear my request and will not refuse to help, never in my life. Glory to You for ever and ever! Father Ihor, I shake your hand and with my lips I sing: many, many years! With respect – Oleksa.

Dear Father Ihor!

01/01/2004 Greetings to you! Happy New Year! We wish you happiness, health, and may your heart rejoice. May your soul sing and may your festive mood not disappear during the whole year. May your virtuous heart continue to be open to people and full of love to your neighbours. With respect – the convict VK.

Christ is Born!

07/01/2004 I wish you happiness, health, a long life, all human pleasures, and inspiration on the thorny way of your priesthood. We are very grateful to you Father Ihor, for your endless love and warmth which you pour out so kindly in your sermons. You have chosen a difficult path – to be the pastor of lost sheep. So may the Lord give you health to get to the lost hearts. With respect – your indebted parishioners.

Father Ihor!

14/10/2004 On the anniversary of your ordination to be a warrior of Christ, the Church of Christ, albeit in prison, we greet you from the bottom of our hearts – all of us! We send thanks to God for the fact that you are in our life. We shake your hand and with our hearts sing: “many, many years!”

16/12/2004 From the bottom of our hearts we greet you, Father Ihor! May people always bring you a sea of flowers and presents on this day. May no one ever cause you grief. Have a long and happy life and never count your years. May happiness, joy, and health always smile upon you.

No one is able to stop time, the forest is green and the garden is blooming, and the stream is running in its own way too. And now on your doorstep there are the wise forty-six. It's not easy to sow, to plough, nor is it easy to gather crops, but there is even more difficult work in this life – to save human souls. May every hour bring you joy and may holy prayer protect you from evil. May your path in life be happy for many years!

80.

*Vania*¹⁰³

This was probably in Khrushchev's or Brezhnev's time, on one of the islands of the Gulag Archipelago where thousands and thousands of prisoners – both political and ordinary – thieves, burglars, robbers, and others, were serving their imprisonment. By great luck, the political ones were then settled separately from the rest. Thus, in the barracks where the narrator of this story was living, only the political inmates were people with a post-secondary education and a set of beliefs, among them, some Ukrainian priests. Therefore, the moral atmosphere in the barracks was better than amongst the ordinary criminals. In the evenings when we had some free time, we engaged in endless conversations and disputes, and the priests were retelling stories from Old Testament, the Gospels, liturgical texts, and all this from their memories because there was of course no religious literature available. Soon these conversations turned into a more or less systematized catechism.

One of the most curious listeners of those courses was one quite young, strong Russian-speaking prisoner (although he could understand Ukrainian very well). He hardly had an education. We will call him Vania. By his social status, he was a typical domestic criminal, an experienced thief, if not worse, although he was naturally very smart, curious, and active. Already in the camp, they convicted him again by one political article, because he tried to escape three times and this was considered a political crime. Thus, he found himself among our more or less educated brothers.

Vania was listening to these conversations attentively, although very skeptically at the beginning, and then more and more supportively. Something was growing in his soul and finally, after some time, he was led to a certain revelation as he suddenly burst with the exclamation: “brothers! Why did I not know all of this before? I have been living for so many years without knowing this! Why only now? And there are thousands and millions of people like me! They must be saved! And here, in the domestic barracks there are thousands of them! We have to teach them all this immediately!” And he instantly ran into the neighbouring barrack although it was forbidden, but practically impossible to regulate.

Now Vania's free time was divided into two parts: listening to the course in his own barrack and then going to preach to his neighbours. Our Fathers got seriously worried. – “Lest there be some trouble!” – “God knows whether it is the Holy Spirit or Satan that is leading him” – “And what can he be preaching there?!..” – “Father Andriy, you are the briskest of all, go and listen to what this neophyte is doing there!?”

And indeed, the danger was obvious. Vania's level of knowledge and oratorical skills were definitely lagging behind the requirements necessary for preaching the word of God. It was impossible to restrain him, plus who would want to limit the already restricted privileges of a prisoner? Father Andriy decided to check this all out. And the lecturer was dealing at that time with the problem of original sin and the expulsion of our ancestors from paradise. Vania did have a natural oratorical talent. The audience was completely captivated by the speaker. The thieves, rapists, and robbers were listening breathlessly – a mosquito would be heard and Vania would rage on! No, dear reader, I will not quote Vania word for word. He went too far away from the canonical text of the Bible. Vania's vocabulary was rich and specific, and since the audience was male, he got carried away with that language. His deep and sincere indignation over the fall of our ancestors, and especially Eve, he poured into the mouth of the angel who expelled them from paradise, but his sword of fire was nothing in comparison with the fire of the word in Vania's interpretation.

“But you...Eve, ...had everything, whatever your soul desired, what else were you lacking? You...God has entrusted with the destiny of all future people...and no,...you...decided to wish the forbidden! And why did you need this..., you..., you did not know yourself,...you..., did not even think in your...head that your sin...would fall onto the heads of all of humankind..., that we...because of you...will sin all our life, and then...will be repenting!”

And so on and so forth, long, long...did Vania speak, it seemed like in Russian, but it was not the language of Turgenev. The text cited above was rich in multi-layer phrasal expressions, epithets addressed to our ancient mother Eve, among which “you, bitch” sounded very tender and nice. Even Eve's mother received her fair share, although as it is known, she never even existed.

¹⁰³ This story was recorded from the lips of Father Roman Krypiakovich.

Three dots often used in this fragment of the speech can be correctly deciphered only by those male readers who served in the Soviet army or fleet, or worked with common workers in Russian factories, visited collective farms in the remote areas of Russia, and this, only provided they have a fabulous imagination.

The audience was listening, as if spell-bound, nobody would even laugh. Father Andriy felt his hair stand on his head and in despair, he ran back to his barrack and reported the scene to his fellow colleague-priests.

They immediately gathered a council and started thinking over the incident. To forbid? To re-qualify? Not a chance! To work through the authorities? – Absolutely excluded! If only we could consult the bishop! – “Do not joke, sirs! We had to solve this now, immediately.”

“We could, for instance, try to coax Vania to give up on this business, but first of all, he would hardly accept our argumentation, and, secondly, was it the right thing to do?” For Vania could do no other. He had to preach because he saw it was necessary. And the language? Well, he was using the tongue of his audience, not a tongue, but argot, and he was mastering this argot. They would not have accepted the literary language, the canonical texts in the same way as one who likes goulash would never eat semolina porridge. Vania understood this, although he probably was not philosophizing; somewhere in his unconsciousness lived the understanding that a human being is most easily convinced in his own language. And after long speculations the Fathers decided not to do anything. To agree with Vania and bless (in our thoughts) his doing, namely, let it be so further, and let God’s will be done. Of course, whenever it was possible we talked to him one-on-one and tried to soften at least partially the horrible form of his charitable mission.

Once by accident, one inmate eavesdropped on a conversation between the authority representatives. It turned out that in the barrack where Vania had been preaching, incidents of regime violation had recently declined – fights, cuts, violence with the weakest, violent debates. How can it be explained?

* In order to find a common language with the imprisoned, one has to understand them, sympathize with them, and love them. The imprisoned also need a human word, attention and kindness because they were also destined for heaven by God. Love conquers the world! I had to suffer a lot in my life, and therefore I know very well what a slice of bread and a drop of water is, what truth, freedom and love are. Therefore, prisoners for me are prison lambs who are behind bars today but tomorrow will be in heaven where they will be sitting under a pear tree, listening to the chirping of birds, and drinking black tea – lots of black tea, free of charge...

Heart, heart, be quiet –
Be rid of grief and all the worries.
All in this world goes, passes away –
All things will be God's way.

A religious book

Rev. Ihor Tsar

THE LAST SHALL BE FIRST

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Epilogue.

Glory to Jesus Christ!

Most Reverend and Dear Father Ihor!

From the bottom of my heart, I greet you and wish you all the best!

I am expressing my fathomless gratitude for your book which gave me an opportunity to know not only your personal life but also recent, still fresh history.

As a foreigner, your book to me is indispensable because it highlights the incredible cruelty and mockery of a totalitarian regime in another country. Although I myself was born and raised in a totalitarian regime, the regime was already living its waning days. Although there were persecutions of Christians in Czechoslovakia, they did not grow to such a magnitude as in the Soviet Union. Your book is valuable first of all as a historic record of the past. From it I also learnt in what way the totalitarian regime can spoil and hurt a human being and make a criminal out of him/her. But at the same time, I understood that nothing is ever lost in the end and a human being can always be saved and brought to God.

From the example of your life, the reader can see how God's grace works in the life of a man who trusted God and gave his life to Him, how God can and wants to lead every human being to Himself. With your life you have shown that one can rise from the deepest hell where everything looks lost and hopeless if you address the Lord and start looking for salvation in Him alone. You not only went through this hell yourself, but what is more remarkable – you did not leave this experience just for yourself but showed the way to others and showed them how to find God.

With your life you experienced the consequences of sin, but with God's help you managed to get out of it and to show the way out to those who found themselves in the same situation. You visited those who are no longer useful in society and let them feel that someone loves them and that for someone they are precious and dear. All this you have passed on to future generations so that they could also learn from you and follow your example of loving one's neighbour with not only words but above all, with deeds. The words of the Divine Saviour: "I was in prison and you visited me..." fell deep into your heart and are bringing rich fruit.

I wish you, dear Father Ihor, God's grace and for your God-given talent to be multiplied a hundredfold so that you will bring Christ's light and hope of eternal life to those who are lost in the depths of their souls.

Given to your prayers,
with gratitude,
Rev. Damyan Kicha, Basilian Order
14/11/2005

Uzhhorod.

FRIAR FRIAR FRIAR