



Visit to Sisters behind the Iron Curtain

When the Communists took over Romania in the 1940's after World War II, all convent communities were disbanded and the sisters dispersed. School Sisters of Notre Dame were no longer allowed to do any kind of ministry. In some cases, sisters returned to live with their families or began to live alone; many were assigned by the government to factory work. The government did not allow religious life to exist. For many years there was no official communication between our sisters in Romania and the rest of the SSND congregation.

In 2007, Sister Jacqueline Buckley recounted a visit she made to the Romanian SSND's with General Superior Sister Mary Margaret Johanning in the mid 1980's when she was a member of the SSND General Council. "The first thing I had to do," said Sister Jacqueline, "was to get a new passport, one that didn't include my religious name, 'Sister Jacqueline Buckley,' along with my legal baptismal name. We couldn't wear any clothing that would identify us as sisters, and we couldn't carry any religious articles or books."

The sisters couldn't fly directly from Rome to Romania, lest they arouse suspicion that their purpose was religious in nature. Instead, they flew to Hungary, (where SSND was the only religious congregation of women allowed to exist), rented a car, and drove to Romania. "I was really frightened at the border," said Sister. "The guards were very hostile. Everything was searched—the car, our bags, ourselves." When a guard found a few single decade rosaries, which looked like simple bracelets, in Sister's bag, he flung them away, increasing their fear that they would be found out.

As "tourists," the sisters stayed in a hotel that was allowed by the Communist government to accept tourists. "We had been warned to assume that our hotel room would be bugged, and that the only place we should speak to each other was in the bathroom with the toilet flushing so that they wouldn't be able to hear us."

On the cold and dreary morning after their arrival, the sisters set out toward the local church. (The Communists claimed that they kept the churches open, but only the outer doors were unlocked. No one could actually enter the church proper.) While they were walking, a woman, very simply attired, linked arms with the General Superior, whom she had never met, and said, "Are you Sister Mary Margaret?" She was one of our sisters, and recognized Sister Mary Margaret's bangs, which were showing under her "babushka." She walked the visitors to the church's sacristy, where several sisters had gathered. They were accustomed to gathering for Mass celebrated clandestinely by an elderly bishop.

One of the things that amazed Sister Jacqueline was that although the sisters were not allowed to communicate with each other by phone or letter, somehow word got around. That day, and for a few days following, many sisters gathered in small groups to meet with Sister Mary Margaret and Sister Jacqueline, the leaders of their religious community. "It was like magic how they communicated," said Sister Jacqueline. "Maybe they used the message, 'Our cousins came for a few days visit.'"

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Sister Jacqueline was extremely touched by the way our Romanian sisters, despite enormous challenges, showed utter faithfulness to God, to their religious vows, and to the SSND Congregation. “Despite enormous pressure, they had an inner freedom and joy that has to come from God. Many of them were elderly, but they took care of each other, especially in times of illness. They lived with extreme hardship, where even bread was scarce. They would take turns standing in line for hours to obtain food, and then share it. Sometimes when they got to the head of the line, there would be no food left. Yet they showed a happiness that would move you to tears.”

When Sister Jacqueline and Sister Mary Margaret had driven back to Hungary, they were summoned to the police station to undergo questioning. They were warned by the Hungarian Sisters to answer honestly, but not to tell the state police more than they asked. “I found out how difficult that is for Americans,” Sister Jacqueline said. “We always want to say more.” The sisters were interviewed separately and were both very scared. Sister continued, “It wasn’t that they really needed to hear what we had to say. We realized that the sole purpose of the interviews was for them to let *us* know that *they* knew what we were about. Somehow the Romanian police and the Hungarian police had communicated.”

Questions for reflection and sharing:

1. What in this story is most striking to you?
2. What do we learn about School Sisters of Notre Dame from this story?
3. When we look at our own ministerial setting or neighborhood, what relevance might we find between this story and our own situation? Could we tell a similar story?

Prayer

Prayer response: Loving God, hear our prayer.

Loving God, with confidence, we offer these petitions:

- ❖ Strengthen those who endure suffering in your Name to further justice and peace in our world....
Loving God, hear our prayer.
- ❖ Support those in leadership, locally and globally, who prefer the common good over personal pursuits...
Loving God, hear our prayer.
- ❖ Affirm our faith and trust that with God, all things are possible...
Loving God, hear our prayer.
- ❖ *Please add your own prayers....* we pray to the Lord....

Concluding Prayer:

Glory to you, Source of All Being, Eternal Word, and Holy Spirit.
As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.