Pray for Brother Alexander

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This morning they gave us 125 grams of bread instead of 100 grams. All morning lessons prior to going out to the solar (a small court surrounded by tall fences) are suspended in order to discuss the event together. The 25 grams extra do not mean freedom, not even enough calories, but they are 25 grams extra. Together with some other extras, infinitesimal as well, the 25 grams weigh heavily and feed us well.

There’s something enchanting about the good in these communist regimes: it comes slowly, in pieces, but irresistibly, when it comes (unfortunately, only to a certain level). Every day brings its own increase: a weaker shove from the guard, a few beans in the soup, a newspaper forgotten as if by mistake, a “what do you think, that I like it?” (Toward the end of my stay, an investigator would do something unbelievable: shaking hands with me.) All these things were accumulated, great pleasure after great pleasure. It’s happiness in installments. It’s true that the evil comes similarly in communism, in installments, and it is infernal. Every day begins with its privation and interdiction, but you also sense for months in advance that you will be arrested. You see how the rock rolls slowly toward you, and you look at it hypnotized. Everyone says that they would have preferred the evil to have come fully from the beginning, not in small portions, and they may be right. But they also want the good to come abruptly, and thus, in their lack of patience, they disregard the admirable chain reaction of the good. Such a restrained eruption is a real school of attention to small things; it is an initiation into life. What price does life have if you do not have access to its infinitesimal?
When we are taken for the walk, they do not take us in the usual solar, but in a larger court, with some grass. Grass! It is a beautiful day and, to our surprise, we are asked to take off our tunics and shirts. They have never allowed this in the solar. Our livid bodies are now an offense to the light. While we look at one another astonished, some officers with a lady show up. She is a doctor who checks our blood pressure. Somebody heard that they would ask us if we want to go to work. It is clear that they do not force us, and this gives us good hopes. Nevertheless, almost all of us would like to go. Matei is the only one who rejects the idea: “I prefer to stay at the University. Such work makes people stupid. There, I am smarter than my colleagues, and I do not like that.”

When it is my turn, I find out that my pressure is 9 over 6. The doctor shakes her head. I hear her telling an officer, “They should all be allowed to recover for one–two months.”

These sad figures and beings that we are wanted to fight not a revolution, for this is dreamlike, but the regime brought by the largest army in the world at that time. They would continue to do it, but just like Don Quixote who, when he was standing before the portrait of St. George or St. Martin, felt that they knew what they had to conquer, but he did not know, just as we no longer know well. We only know one thing: that we do not like this. It’s possible that the entire world, the communists included, may fight to change or at least correct the regime, just because it uglifies life and the world. The others regimes follow it in its steps. Some people here reproach the free world that it has not applied communism within its conditions. But its fault is more serious: it has no model to offer, but only some temptations. Everywhere the world is enchanted by ugliness today. Dulcinea, whom Sancho, exasperated, shows to Don Quixote under the face of a country girl encountered on the road, truly

* Communist political prisons were filled with intellectuals from all fields. There are other testimonies that refer to the prison as to a university, precisely because people could listen to various lectures given by others, as Noica mentions as well.
exists, but she is bewitched in ugliness. Only now, when the fight no longer has meaning, when the free world also revealed its ugliness, a counterrevolution in the name of freedom would have grandeur: you would fight for liberating the world everywhere from the spell of ugliness.

“I would like to tell you the story of Don Quixote,” I said after the meal in our cell, when I am asked to speak.

“Look,” the theologian intervenes, “we are sick of books and movies.”

“But this book is about us,” I insist.

“We are tired of us too, with our DonQuixotisms!”

The theologian is the one among us who truly fought against the regime. He has an extra certainty and authority in everything he says: “We would like to know what is to be done. We want practical solutions. We know well that Don Quixote has deep words — I remember the advice he gives to Sancho when he is named governor — but, if he were the one to govern during those three days, he would have been worse than Sancho. This is the problem: what do we do, not what we are and what we say. How can someone create a good state?”

How miraculously do man’s resources get recovered! They just gave us 25 grams of bread extra, and these convinced fighters already consider that they may have the responsibilities of victors one day. A state? A good state?

I turn toward the theologian: “I know only one stupidity greater than the ideal state: the ideal army. If the state and the army are ideal, we are done for. There still are Germans today who tell themselves that it was something extraordinary that their army resisted before the entire world twice. So what? If an army is so good that it instills every ecstasy, then it becomes a curse. If a state functions too well as a state, it is a plague for an individual. But all utopias about a state want this. Humanity was lucky that nobody tried to accomplish Plato’s Republic: the totalitarianisms of our century are nothing compared to it. Any time I hear somebody complaining that he does not get a passport, I tell him that, in Plato’s state, a man cannot get out of the city until he is fifty, and even then only on a special mission. The
good thing is that the state will disappear one day, as the communists say. Unfortunately, no one knows when.”

“This is precisely why we must create bearable states in the meantime,” the theologian responds. “There is something incomprehensible regarding our states: we have all seen people going to war joyously, but we haven’t seen anyone going to pay taxes with joy. Why? After all, it’s about the same thing, the city, the state.”

I find the theologian’s observation interesting. I attempt an explanation: “After all, in war you feel you are a super-citizen, while you are a simple citizen when you pay taxes. The state should create super-citizens during peace as well. Or I should say it this way: the state is forced to limit the individual, but it should liberate the ‘person.’”

“These are just words,” the theologian says. “It is as Nietzsche said, that the state must be a nursery for geniuses. Very beautiful, but how? Let’s say something concrete, not just in general what should be done.”

I feel cornered. In fact, I have an idea, but I was ashamed to ever share it with anyone else, because of its naivety. My utopia, however, has a merit: it does not involve a coup it is applicable everywhere, and it only requires a few checkbooks and an administrative disposition.

“I have imagined a way,” I begin, “and I must tell you about it, regardless of how fanciful it may seem: ‘the unlimited credit.’ I imagine a state with unlimited credit, one in which, at the beginning, a few hundred citizens, then a few thousands, anyway, God knows how many, will have the right to a checkbook.”

“What do you mean a checkbook?”

“A checkbook, like a rich person who can pay any sum anywhere; just that, in our case, the sum would not be limited, as it still is in the case of a billionaire.”

“But this is crazy. How can you give to a citizen the possibility to spend more than a billionaire?”

“He will spend less than one or two salaries, but he will have the unlimited on his side and will shame the poor billionaire.”

“Still, he does not dispose of the money like him, you say.”
“He does not, because this man doesn’t need much; it is sufficient for him to know that he can dispose of anything, so that he has no worries and takes care of his job.”

“And what does society gain out of this?”

“This is where the problem comes: society begins to define itself, or to get some balance and backbone by those it credits. It begins to know what kind of people it wants to bring forward. Don’t you find it curious that we elect Miss Austria or Miss Europe, but not the successful specimen of a society? We have beauty prototypes. Couldn’t we have a prototype of human nature? Perhaps one of the works that risked unbalancing American society was the anarchy of the prototypes. To what should we aspire? What success should we obtain? From here, all those idols taken altogether from the ranks of heroes, of adventurers, of the ‘kings’ of shoe polish or of the newspaper sellers who became presidents of a country. But these idols could not be prototypes, because their success was limited and often strictly personal. The only open success there, which is at everyone’s disposal, is that of money, and this is sad. In the old world, the prototype seemed to be given by aristocracy, but it also was limited and, in any case, it was lacking a truly human message. So, if a state has responsibilities beyond the administrative and national ones, it would have the one of producing and supporting chosen people.”

“Pensions for merit or favors have been given at all times,” someone says — everyone was listening to us already.

“But it is not about pensions, but investments; not payments, but credits. The selection should be done among young people, between thirty and thirty-five years old, so at an age when their human promise has been affirmed, but unaccomplished. At the beginning, we would choose 200–300 young people who would receive all freedoms together with the material means. We should less prefer young people with exceptional talents — artists, mathematicians, physicians, or poets, people who create their own place by themselves, through their singularity — and instead beings with complete human gifts, intellectual, moral, and practically creative. From any field, we would choose people
who would have demonstrated up to that age that they want and they can give a creative meaning to their lives, with dignity. We would authorize them to choose their place, to change it whenever they think it is needed, to travel wherever they feel they should, to capitalize on their thoughts and raise their children as they wish. We would give them the checkbook and tell them, ‘decide for yourself and do what you want.’"

From that moment, something extraordinary took place in the cell: my idea stopped belonging to me. I don’t know how, but it was transformed into an object for play, for quarrel, for imagination, or for ecstasy of all. Perhaps under the effect of the extra bread or of the sun and of the hopes brought back to life, perhaps under the magic of the “unlimited” credit, people seemed taken by a hunger for this idea like I have not encountered before. They were all making and destroying projects. Something seemed good for my idea: I clearly sensed that everyone considered themselves targeted, wondering whether he would deserve or would have deserved a checkbook. This was, of course, the source of their positive or negative reactions.

“I would not accept a checkbook,” someone says.
“You will accept it if they give it to you.”
“I will not. I want to gain my own money.”
“What is that, your money? This is the only way in which it would be yours, if you deserved to be credited because of the life you had until you were thirty years old.”
“Being credited, so being a guinea pig? I want to be free, sir, I want to do what I like.”
“But this is precisely what you are allowed to do with the unlimited credit, to finally do whatever you like.”
“I would like to buy a yacht.”
“You would not like to buy a yacht, but only to go around with it from time to time, which is perfectly honorable.”
“No, I would like it to be my yacht, to equip it as I see fit, to stain it as I want.”
“Possibly, but then you are not thirty years old yet.”
“I’m already forty.”
“No, I’m telling you, you are not thirty yet. You would not be thirty even if you said that you wanted a castle according to your taste or paintings by Rembrandt and Turner, which only you, and perhaps a few friends, would admire! Something has changed in the world. We know today that man’s taste, his capacity to delight, and his reason are not limited to a class, and even less by one man; and we know even more, that you don’t like your things if others don’t like them as well.”

“It’s true,” Matei intervenes, “I also found that, if the bride is not liked by others, then the groom does not like her either.”

“Okay, but do you realize the anarchy that would result if some people would be allowed, even paid, to do what they like?”

The theologian, who after all had triggered the whole discussion, intervenes here: “I think that our friend, when he dreams a state that would tell a few hundreds people ‘decide for yourself and do what you want,’ recovers — without knowing or without wanting — St. Augustine’s saying, ‘love and do what you want.’ This saying also seemed to be crazy; but we know its meaning, that precisely the one who truly loves no longer does ‘what one wants, but only what one must, because any love is after all love of God. The people whom society would credit unlimitedly would have an unlimited responsibility.’”

“But how to choose? Even if there were only three hundred at the beginning, you must know their lives, their promise, to see if they are not badly married — because the wives or, respectively, the husbands of those with checkbooks, can destroy the whole game —, to appreciate if their human gifts truly are of interest to society, etc., etc. Who chooses them and how? By notes, just like the ball’s queen?”

“Allow me to tell you how I think the beginning would be done,” I try to intervene. But, to my joy, somebody takes it from there, for my opinions no longer matter.

“Let’s suppose,” he says, “that the choice of the first three hundred was done, regardless of how it was done. Among those, fifty, forty, or thirty were not chosen badly. You see, the nucleus for the development of the ‘state with unlimited credit’ would be established. From this point, we know who would credit oth-
ers, who would make those who prove unworthy fall from the condition of credited people, who would control, discreetly but firmly, others, as they control themselves. Actually, public opinion would also have a role…”

“Thank you. Having a star on my chest and being controlled by anyone, whether I eat at a better restaurant, what I eat and what I drink, just because I do it on their account?”

“You don’t need to have a star on your chest, because from someplace, from the inside, not from the outside, the sense of measure would appear.”

“I would even enjoy checking annually the accounts of a ‘credited person,’” someone, an accountant by trade, says.

“But then it is not really a privilege to be credited,” the one with the yacht says. “If all people have with eyes on you, and then you also have the internal eye, what kind of a life is this?”

“It is a human life, or we are all worthless,” the doctor, with his categorical judgment, decides. “If we are not able to handle the responsibility of being humans, under the request and with the support of society, then…”

“Then let us do like the existentialists,” someone jumps, “complain about the human condition.”

“No, then we deserve to commit mass suicide,” the doctor decides.

“Well, well, all of these things are beautiful for the individual, or for the person, as you want to call him. But what changes do they bring to the state?”

“What do you mean what changes?,” someone says. “They change everything. For a capitalist state, it is a terrible corrective, I would even say a whipping: think of how much people fret to gain what they need, and even more than they need, but never enough, according to them, leaving all the rest — honesty, humanity, culture, creativity — to be secondary or to ‘come by itself,’ while here this rest would be the primary and money would come by itself, without struggle and always as much as needed. It would be an even greater corrective for a communist state: here, where people are dispossessed by force, and so, regardless of the level to which their right to possess would be
restored, this right would no longer interest them. Here, then, where man is directed in all ways, like a minor, it would be such a great blessing to give him unlimited credit not only at the financial level, but also at that of freedom and human dignity!"

“I consider even another aspect,” a professor says. “Even if the credited ones would not be that great, their educative function would be extraordinary. Parents would raise their children having in mind the purpose of getting the checkbook, if the number of the credited ones is not limited; and I think that many young people, after the excesses of their early youth, would consider how to get qualified when they approach thirty. The society would have princely conditions to aspire to.”

“But, after all, what would these princes do?”

“That’s exactly what I like, that we do not clearly know what they would do,” somebody else says. “We do not know what man can give under a request that would not be professionally narrow. The state usually closes people’s lives, as if telling them, ‘You will do this, you will be that.’ Now, it would not only tolerate man’s freedom, but it would also support it with its means. Man was free only at the level of the individual. Now he would be free at the level of society.”

“In fact, it would be normal to choose the society’s political leaders from among these elements that are credited by it…”

At this moment, when the game seemed to be won for the “state of unlimited credit,” a subtle and gloomy thought comes to engineer Goldstein’s mind.

“Thus, you build a state that would free people who, in their turn, think of a new state? I grant you that these people are good. But what guarantees that the state which they would create is not evil?”

A shiver goes through my body at the memory of the tyranny of the good ones in history. What do we know about man when he is inflamed by the fury of power? I would like to withdraw my project, but it is already too late. The theologian says, “Gentlemen, this state is in any case a good discussion theme. I propose to create committees to research every aspect it has: the mode of its constitution, its administrative problems, the function in
economy and production that such free and mobile specimens would have, their educative role and their leadership, the limits of the unlimited credit, etc. . . . Don’t you think that, not having something else, it is good to discuss it in an organized fashion?”

Engineer Goldstein comes close to me: “They did not allow you to narrate Don Quixote, but you still talked about Don Quixote.”