



# Solzhenitsyn: A life with no lies

**A homage to his life, works and relentless love for freedom**

**Speakers:** **Adriano Dell'ASTA**—Professor of Russian Language and Literature  
Catholic University of Milan  
**Liudmila SARASKINA**—Russian Literature Historian and  
Personal Collaborator of Solzhenitsyn

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**Crossroads:** Good evening, and welcome on behalf of Crossroads Cultural Center. A special thanks to Fordham Campus Ministry who helped us to organize this event. It is a great pleasure for us to host a discussion devoted to such a significant figure as Alexander Solzhenitsyn. Sometimes it is easy for us to think that the experience of the Russian people under Communism that Solzhenitsyn lived and depicted was just a result their own culture and their own history, and as such is not really relevant to us. But is that really true?

In many ways communist totalitarianism was an extreme manifestation of certain deep currents in the history of the West that are still active today, also in our history - the idea that human reality can be reduced to its economic and material factors, the idea that society can and should be regulated according to "scientific" principles, the idea that religion is a form of alienation directed towards an imaginary reality, where God is unnecessary to live a fully human life here and now, the idea that freedom, morality, and beauty are ultimately illusions, byproducts of purely biological and social forces. These were the philosophical principles of Marxism: are they really so far removed from today's mentality? Does our culture always understand and respect human freedom and the dignity of the person? Are we completely immune to the big temptation that Solzhenitsyn identified: to take God's place and in the process lose our freedom? The world is still facing some of the same ideologies, maybe more subtle and thus even more insidious.

For this reason Solzhenitsyn still has so much to say to us. And for this reason the experience of the Russian people which Solzhenitsyn describes is so important: because it is a witness of how human beings can keep their freedom by recognizing that they are made by the Infinite, to be in relationship with the Infinite. Solzhenitsyn's relentless love for freedom is such a great example for us.

And we at Crossroads desire that this event be only the first step in a journey that will bring us to explore, in the next couple of years, some other fascinating aspects of the Russian culture, aspects that we believe are relevant to us. First: the unique greatness of the I in some of the great Russian writers. Second the belonging to a people as the essential dimension of the individual in a few Russian composers; Third, the beauty of the "icons" as a unique representation of the relationship between the creature and the Mystery of God. Finally, the status of the dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox church in light of the apostolate of Pope Benedict XVI and the new Metropolitan of Moscow. I now leave to Mr. Christopher Bacich, high school teacher, dear friend of Crossroads and tonight's moderator, the task of starting the conference, by first saying a couple of words about a video we are about to watch and then presenting our very distinguished speakers.

**Bacich:** Tonight we are going to see a 14-minute interview with Alexander Solzhenitsyn. This is a clip taken from an hour-long documentary showing various moments of Solzhenitsyn's life from where he lived in Vermont up until his return to Russia, as well as interviews with his wife and children. The documentary was written and directed by Sergei Miroshnichenko and produced by Sergei Miroshnichenko and Alexander Balashov for the Russian TV station "Rossija."

The original title of the documentary *Solzhenitsyn at the Final Stretch of the River* relates to something that Solzhenitsyn himself said, "After a very strong chest pain, I felt as if I were at my final stretch of the river and there were no boats left for me. I have done and lived much, but my heart cannot resign to the final stretch."

Please note, you will see some Italian subtitles, as the interview was shown last summer at the Meeting of Rimini in Italy.

***Video of Last Interview with Alexander Solzhenitsyn***

Q. Alexander Isaevich, they say that Russia has a path of its own ...

A. S. Of course. Christians certainly believe that God has some sort of plan for Russia. But one mustn't think that, just because there exists a divine plan, that God Himself will carry it out ...

We have been given free will. We don't always understand what God's plan is; sometimes we take the wrong path. And if you survey the whole of our history over the centuries, it's clear we've made a lot of mistakes.

Q. What can young people do today to get things back on track?

A.S. Young people today are surrounded by cruel temptations. The trumpet of social Darwinism has been sounded. Now it's every man for himself! Hurry up and succeed. Make as much money as you can. Go for it. The most terrible thing, for young people, is this temptation, because it seduces many of them, and corrupts them. As for what can be done: the main thing is to work on one's self, and in the first place, impose some sort of ethical limits and to continue one's development within these limits. And if one succeeds in this, then to seek out others who are following the same path. Our government system today is not conducive to taking such steps. Our government system today isn't the least bit democratic. What we have instead is a tyranny of the bureaucrats. Hence, these groups of volunteers who are aware of the need for moral action—perhaps they have no long-term vision, but at least they have a sense of what is needed in the short-term: things are going to be tough for them.

Q. What you've said just now, it sounds like a call to many of us—in the 21<sup>st</sup> century—to become dissidents!

A.S. It's better not to use the word 'dissident' today. It might ... get interpreted wrongly. Better to say "non-conformist" or "someone who thinks freely."

Q. But then ... what about humility?

A.S. In the social sphere, where millions of people are suffering, the appropriate word is patience or forbearance, not humility. The Russian people are endowed with a great deal of patience, and this can be the source of an exalted form of morality. But it can also be the source of societal failures. And so, as a matter of principle, I am against revolutions. In my view, change should always follow an evolutionary path.

I made an effort, which isn't very well known, .. [dog appears on camera] ... go away, go! ... Oh well, then, stay here ... I made an attempt to enter into a dialogue with the leadership of the Soviet Union and explain my position. I understood that this was a hopeless task. But nonetheless, in September 1973 I sent a letter to the leaders of the Soviet Union, and appealed to them to give a thought for the welfare of the people. I do not claim to be a man without contradictions. Of course I have all sorts of inconsistencies. I condemn revolution. But when, in the camps, an uprising was gathering force, of course I participated in it, wholeheartedly. It's inconsistent. 'But that's not the right way ... ' one would think ... And yet that's what I did.

Q. How did you participate in the rebellion?

A.S. I did participate at one point. In any case, when in response to it they were sweeping their automatic weapons across the camp, shooting us, my mood was – while the others were running into the barracks in front of me, trying to hide—I was in no hurry, letting the others get ahead of me, I was thinking, ‘To hell with it; go ahead and kill me you bastards.’ I’d reached the breaking point.

Q. In one of your works you state that spending time in jail is a blessing—for an artist ...

A. S. Yes, but at the end of that same book I add, “Well, that’s easy for *you* to say, after having survived!” You see what I mean? It is a blessing for those who manage to survive, and who manage to draw from it a moral lesson.

Q. What was your personal experience, while living among the people? What profession or skills did you pick up?

A.S. For the most part, it was the skill of working as a mason. I got pretty good at laying bricks.

Q. And when, in *Ivan Denisovich*, you describe certain particulars ...

A. S. Those are definitely all from my own experience! Without that personal experience, I couldn’t have understood it. Bricklaying isn’t the sort of thing you pick up just from observation. You have to do it.

[Transition screen]

A.S. I was raised in the spirit of Eastern Orthodoxy, in an absolutely anti-Bolshevik spirit. Such was my entire childhood. Then I started going to school, and it was in school that they started to hound me—for being a Christian, for being some sort of socially alien element ...

Q. What did they do to you?

A.S. They would tear the cross off of my neck. I didn’t join the Pioneers, so they went after me for that ... Then they started stuffing me with all this ideology: dialectical materialism, historical materialism. I read a great deal ... So many elevated ideas! I got carried away and started believing it. I was stupid like that for a short period of my life—seven or eight years. I completely freed myself from all of that only in jail. In the camps people don’t debate ideas, because there isn’t any time, you’re always working. Hit the sack as fast as you can; then in the morning it’s back to work! But in jail it’s different. All you do is argue! Freedom of speech! I spent a couple of months in jail around 1945 – 1946. I argued and argued ‘till I finally understood that I was just a kid wet behind the ears. Men with real life experience and even an understanding of philosophy convinced me I was wrong. They prepared me for the Gulag, for *The Gulag Archipelago*...

[transition to new theme]

... My mother’s fate was very hard. She and my father got married on the frontlines in 1917; she visited him at the front. It was only after the collapse of the entire front that they were able to live together. They lived together, as a family, for only three months. That was the whole of their married life, three months. At the end of those three months she was pregnant with me, and then my father got wounded during a hunting accident and died from a blood infection.

So she was left behind, and first she had to give birth to me, then bring me up, and from then on she had nothing but backbreaking labor for the rest of her life. She worked day and night, and she had little time of her own to spend on bringing me up. We were living at first in a dilapidated hut; then we lived in a stable for horses—a former stable. The back wall of the KGB building, the shade from it, loomed over us. Every day I would walk past a line of women holding food parcels, standing there in the rear courtyard of the KGB, to deliver their parcels. They wouldn't let them bring things through the front door. .... So you see, my mother sacrificed her whole life for me. She died in Georgievsk, a year before I was arrested. That was January of 1944. Meanwhile I, up until February 1945, was still fighting on the front. Then they immediately sent me to prison, and after that to the camps, and then into exile. It wasn't until 1956 that I was able to visit her grave and place a cross there ... That's how it was.

Artists get put into all sorts of categories, according to various 'isms,' or literary movements; all these 'isms,' and so forth. But all these divisions, which sometimes are simply made up out of thin air, are not so important as the division between artists who believe and those who do not. Those who are *not* believers are free from any higher authority. There is no one above them. If, for example, I am not a believer, I am the creator of a universe. I write a novel -- and I have created a world. I am the demiurge. This creates the impression ... it creates such a pride. And usually such artists exhaust themselves, they can't reach the heights of true artistry. Whereas an artist who is a believer, who at least has an awareness of God, in other words, that there exists above us a higher power, he can't help acting as if he were God's apprentice ...

Pride is one of the worst of vices, which shouldn't ... You know how some people boast, 'I am so *proud* of this or that!' But one should never be proud. You can be satisfied. 'I'm satisfied with how this book has turned out, and thank God for that! Now I'll write another one.' But to be proud ... to even go so far as national pride, pride about the country one lives in. No. God forbid!

Q. But when you completed the 'Red Wheel' cycle [of historical novels] surely you felt some pride?

A.S. I felt only a great, a complete satisfaction for having completed this work of half a century. I've never been proud of anything.

Q. Even when they gave you the Nobel Prize?

A.S. I didn't feel any pride at all. I went and picked it up. And not right away, at that!

[Scene of applause in Stockholm ]

You know, you can live a long time in the conviction of not having sinned, convinced that you were a good person, and suddenly, even if you haven't received any hard knocks, or perhaps after you have been knocked [(laughs)] good and hard by fate, by life ... you begin to think, to remember. And you say to yourself, 'My God! I've done wrong to this person, and to that person, and to *that* person! What have I done? How have I lived my life?! I mean to say, never having considered myself a sinner, never having been some sort of free-wheeling playboy ... to suddenly arrive at the realization that one's whole life has been one long chain of sins! And one needs to repent of them.

The ability to repent is indeed a Russian national characteristic; it has deep roots, because of Orthodoxy. But besides repentance there is also simple remorse, and remorse is an absolutely indispensable quality in a person. I thought that, after the country left Bolshevism behind, at least someone, at least one person among all the henchmen and liars would express remorse. But I didn't notice even isolated voices of repentance. Not a trace. It was as if nothing had happened. Right away, everyone just wiped off their brows and walked off into the new

age. Some people threw out their (Communist) Party membership cards, others hid them away ... Today, people in the political class, those who know about the crimes and mistakes and outrages that are taking place—do they fight any of these things? I don't see it. I see nothing but party squabbles ... Each of us is born with a certain moral potential, certain talents, inside us. They are different in every person, but everyone is born with such talents. Gradually, as a person matures, and whether or not we are immediately aware of it, these talents make themselves known. From the moment we become aware that we have them, it is our task from that moment forward and throughout our lives to not corrupt them, not damage them, but instead, to try in at least some small measure to increase them. ~*Translated by Paul R. Grenier, Kensington, MD*

**Bacich:** I will now present our first speaker, Liumila Saraskina. Ms. Saraskina has a degree in humanities, is a professor at the University of Moscow and the Director of the Institute of Russian Science and Arts. She published more than 300 articles on Russian Literature, in particular on Dostovïeski. She was a personal collaborator of Solzhenitsyn until his death and she recently published his biography. She is also a member of the jury for the prestigious Solzhenitsyn Prize.

**Saraskina:** My book, *Alexander Solzhenitsyn*, is the first biography of the author that presents a full, well-documented account of the life and work of this great Russian writer. In this work, I have endeavored, step by step, to reconstruct the author's life, both in its personal and literary dimensions, throughout Solzhenitsyn's entire journey, from birth to his recent death. I wrote this biography on the basis of my personal conversations with Solzhenitsyn and members of his family, and also made use of a great many documents, accounts and reminiscences of people who knew the author well. Through this biography of Alexander I. Solzhenitsyn, I wanted to show the tragedy and also the grandeur of Russian history during the 20th century. There is every reason to consider Alexander Solzhenitsyn not just a witness to that century of Russian history, but also its greatest protagonist.

Solzhenitsyn's work was clearly in continuity with the finest traditions of Russian literature, with its heartfelt concern for the fate of Russia, its sympathy for the "insulted and humiliated," its ever-present striving for Truth and Justice. Through works that so clearly demonstrated his own call to not "live by lies," he became, in all probability, the most important Russian writer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

A half-century after such Russian writers as Gorky, Bunin, Rozanov and many others had been sought after by the reading public throughout the world, it was precisely Solzhenitsyn who again gained the attention of a worldwide audience. More than any other Russian writer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Solzhenitsyn became known throughout the world--as a man with a legendary fate; a man who struggled against a totalitarian system; who was a master wordsmith and the voice of a people.

Alexander I. Solzhenitsyn was born in 1918 in the city of Kislovodsk. Fatherless -- his father died half a year before Solzhenitsyn's birth -- he lived with his mother in Rostov, the same city where he was schooled and studied in the university. At an early age (10) he felt drawn to writing. He began composing poems, stories, and longer works, and read some of them to his school friends. From autumn of 1941 through February 1945 he fought in the war against the Nazis, earning a number of medals. In February 1945 he was arrested for having criticized Stalin in letters that had been written to a friend from school, as was discovered by military censors. He was sentenced to eight years in the labor camps to be followed by permanent exile in the hinterlands. While in the camps he was operated on for cancer. Subsequently, while in exile, he underwent chemotherapy and radiation treatment for metastases of the earlier cancer. After Stalin's death and during the subsequent Thaw, he was freed from exile and rehabilitated. He then began working as a teacher of mathematics and physics in a provincial school, while working in secret on plays and a novel. His first published work, "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich" (1961), tells the story of inmates in the Ekibastuz hard labor camp, and the atmosphere that reigned there. The author himself had spent three years in this camp. The decision to publish the work was taken at the very highest level—by the head of state Nikita Khrushchev, chairman of the CPSU. His novel, *The*

*First Circle*, describes the special labor camp at Marfino (near Moscow) where scientists working on secret projects were interned and where Solzhenitsyn himself spent three years. The novel *Cancer Ward* depicts a cancer clinic in Tashkent—the very one where Solzhenitsyn himself, while still in exile, had been treated. It was in the middle of the 1960s that Solzhenitsyn began working in secret on his major work that would soon make him world famous: *The Gulag Archipelago*, which gave an account of the entire system of labor camps in the USSR. In 1973 the work was published in Paris. In response, Solzhenitsyn was stripped of his citizenship, accused of betraying his country, and deported. He spent twenty years (1974-1994) in exile outside of the country; first in Switzerland (Zurich), then in the U.S. (Vermont), where he focused his attentions on the epic series “The Red Wheel” dedicated to telling the story of the Russian Revolution. In 1994, on the heels of the enormous changes taking place in Russia he returns to Russia, travels a great deal about the country, and speaks out in public against the authorities and ‘bureaucratism.’ In 1998 he writes the topical non-fiction work *Russia in Collapse*, which criticizes the destructive effects of liberal reforms, and in 2001-2002 a new book called *200 Years Together*, which is devoted to the two-hundred-year-old history of relations between the Russian and Jewish peoples. The author devotes the last years of his life to preparing for publication a 30-volume collected works. Volumes began appearing in 2006 and will be completed in 2010. Solzhenitsyn did manage to see several volumes printed while he was still living. On August 3, 2008, Solzhenitsyn passed away. He was buried in the ancient cemetery of Donskoy Monastery, accompanied by very large crowds. He had not quite reached his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. In December 2008, the 90-year anniversary of the author was celebrated throughout Russia.

My first indirect meeting with Solzhenitsyn came about in a rather paradoxical manner. I was studying in graduate school at the time, in Moscow. I had managed to find work at TASS (the Russian news agency) as a proofreader. My job was to keep track of the Teletype machine and follow what the news feed was delivering. My shift lasted thirteen hours, and I had to watch out for bad punctuation, misspelled names and so forth. February 12<sup>th</sup>, 1974, at 8 a.m., I started my first shift. The first news item to cross my eyes was the announcement by the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR that it was banishing Solzhenitsyn from the Soviet Union. During my first break I ran out of the TASS building to a phone booth and started calling friends. I was extremely dismayed, because I knew full well that now I would never get the chance to either see or hear this man. At the time it struck me that fate must be sending me some sort of signal. I gave it the following interpretation: that I must undertake a serious study of Solzhenitsyn’s literary work, and that I should give this task as much attention as I was already giving to Dostoevsky. At the time I was already deeply immersed in Dostoevsky studies, and remain so to this day.

There is a perfectly organic connection between these two classic writers. They share a great deal. In the first instance, their life stories. Both were sent to penal colonies, and their response to the experience was also very similar. Dostoevsky’s worldview changed; he rejected his earlier fascination with socialist ideas. The same thing happened to Solzhenitsyn, who wrote of his youth: “I was beguiled by communism ... infected with the virus of world revolution.” Only the labor camps brought him to the realization that “there is no better vantage point from which to view the Russian Revolution than through the window grills of the prisons that it erected.”

There is another important point of comparison. *The Brothers Karamazov* was written at the beginning of the 1880s. Dmitry, Ivan, Alyosha are all young men. They will certainly still be alive in 1914, and they will live to see the Revolution as well, and they will be run over by the “Red Wheel.” It suffices to read Solzhenitsyn’s epic to understand that he is writing about the same human types. The brothers will have to make their fateful choices—whose side to join, how to define themselves ... Dostoevsky foresaw the difficulties that awaited his literary heroes, and the dark days ahead for Russia. For Solzhenitsyn, it was a matter of prophecies that had already come true. He described what actually befell Russia during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Dostoevsky and Solzhenitsyn form part of the same canvas of Russian life. The only difference is that one works from the vantage point of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the other, from the 20<sup>th</sup>. It strikes me as perfectly natural to have taken up the study of Solzhenitsyn after Dostoevsky—alongside of Dostoevsky.

Twenty-one years after that episode in 1974--on January 3, 1995, to be precise—Alexander Isaevich [Solzhenitsyn—trans.] himself called me on my home telephone. “Hi, this is Solzhenitsyn,” he said matter-of-factly. “... We used to read your articles in Vermont ... You know the Moscow literary scene well, while we don’t have many acquaintances left who still live here ... Why don’t we get together and talk ...” We got together a week later at the very same, now legendary, apartment on Kozitsky Lane where he had lived with his family before being sent out of the country; the apartment where he had been kept under surveillance every minute of the day, and from which he had been arrested and sent to Lefortovo prison. Our conversations and meetings became a regular thing and evolved into various forms of collaboration. In 1996, Solzhenitsyn invited me to be a member of the selection jury for his [Solzhenitsyn] Literary Award. It was only in 2000 that I settled on the idea of writing a book about him.

The book that I had in mind at first was to be called “The Solzhenitsyn Phenomenon in the Context of Russian Literature.” It would include chapters such as “Lessons From Dostoevsky within Solzhenitsyn’s Creative Trajectory” (already written and published), “Lev Tolstoy and Solzhenitsyn” (I presented this material at literary conferences at [Tolstoy’s estate at] *Iasnaya Polyana*), and “How [Chekhov’s] ‘Island of Sakhalin’ Influenced Solzhenitsyn.” There were to be chapters on Anna Akhmatova, Mikhail Bulgakov, and Evgennii Zamyatin as well. My idea was to write a work of literary-historical scholarship studying the interrelationship between Solzhenitsyn and the Russian classics from a variety of different vantage points: motifs, plots, ideology and personal fate.

To write this book I needed a detailed outline of his entire biography—a tentative chronology that would eventually be worked up into an appendix to the book. I started collecting materials. That took two years. In the end, though, I came across something that I had never met with before: there was just an enormous number of inaccuracies and absurdities, slanders, and outright lies being bandied about concerning his life. It was clear that all this stood in need of clarification and a truthful response.

That’s when I approached Alexander Isaevich. He knew about all this, in general terms. But I don’t think even he realized the full dimensions of the thing. I mean, there were even lies being told about his parents, his family, his childhood, his service during the war, his time in the camps and in exile—about his whole life from beginning to end. For example, there were those who wrote that Solzhenitsyn hadn’t served at the front, that he spent his military career cooling his heels in the rear. Or—that he’d never had cancer, that he’d just made that all up. To answer all this in a competent fashion I would need documents, evidence: everything had to be grounded on the most solid basis. There was a lot that Alexander Isaevich himself would need to help clarify.

My work with Solzhenitsyn began in 2001. I visited him regularly at his home in Troitse-Lykovo, Dictaphone in hand, and asked questions for my “Chronicle of the life and works” of Solzhenitsyn. Over the course of a couple of years I put together a great deal of material. Meanwhile, Alexander Isaevich keeps saying to me, “I don’t want any biographies written about me during my own lifetime. That is not part of our Russian tradition. If, fifty years after my death, I still form part of the history of Russian literature, well, that’s another matter. Let someone write my biography then.” But I nonetheless kept on accumulating materials, putting them away for some unknown future use.

How did it come about that my working papers got transformed into a biography that definitely was *not* posthumous? Toward the end of 2005 the “Molodaya Gvardiya” publishing house declared the initiation of a project called “The Biography Continues.” They called Solzhenitsyn’s house and spoke with his wife. She explained that Alexander Isaevich finds the concept of a biography being written while a person is still alive untenable. Then the representatives of the publishing house dropped a hint that their phone call was more by way of an FYI: they were informing the Solzhenitsyns that the biography was in any case going to move forward. It sounded like they were going to commission a biography—and would most likely appoint a person who would make use of all those published lies and that whole panoply of unreliable and inaccurate sources. So

Solzhenitsyn decided, as long as a biography of him was going to come out while he was alive in any case, might as well have the biographer be a person who has been working with the relevant materials for a very long time. That's how my task got redefined, and I became Solzhenitsyn's biographer.

By this point I'd already accumulated a great deal of materials. But a 'chronicle' is just that--a chronological record of events. It's not a text. It's not a narrative divided into chapters. It's not even a book outline. It's just a schematic breakdown of dates, events and documentary evidence. To write the book I had to get out a blank sheet of paper and start all over, building up the composition as I went, putting together subjects for chapters, finding the right narrative voice, trying to tell the story of every stage on the journey. I was given eighteen months as my deadline. I knew full well Solzhenitsyn's concerns about biographers. He disliked them with good cause. About the whole gaggle of biographers who have written about him, more than once he has written and said: "they tell lies about me as if I were already dead." I decided I would write about him 'as if' he were alive. That demands from an author a completely different level of accountability. I needed to hold myself accountable to a whole host of living people, people who had themselves been involved in one way or another in Solzhenitsyn's life story. I needed to be dead certain about what I wrote. There was no room for different 'versions,' 'imaginative reconstructions,' or 'conjecture.'

I had sixteen months to complete my work; all that time I worked fourteen, fifteen hours a day, every day. To make things more complicated, I had to double-check much of what was in my earlier 'chronicle.' At the time, lots of things had seemed unimportant. Now, every detail was important. His first girlfriend. First friends. First poems. Fellow students while in college. Army buddies from his regiment. Fellow prisoners in the camps. Family. Children. His intimate circle. I needed to fill a great many gaps in my archive of information. Documents showered down on me as if out of a horn of plenty. I brought home with me from the Solzhenitsyns a whole enormous archive. The room where I wrote was so jam-packed with boxes and crates that it became difficult to even move my way through them. My main fear was that a fire would break out, or that the upstairs neighbors would have a flood. There were priceless materials here, original copies of things, autographs ...

I was astonished by Solzhenitsyn's notebooks from his childhood and adolescence, his earliest manuscripts, poems, prose, stories. It turns out that he had "published," so to speak, hand-written children's magazines. For these latter he was simultaneously author, publisher, editor and journalist. One finds in the pages of these magazines an active correspondence between writer and editor. He was both the writer and the editor. From his earliest childhood, Solzhenitsyn had played at literature, but it was for him a very serious form of play. He created a whole literary universe around himself. He would indicate, in his literary magazine, the print run. From month to month the print run grew, because the "editors" went to great lengths to lure new "readers." There were crosswords, puzzles, and chess questions. And he did all this by himself. I came to understand that for him, right from the very start, it was the literary stage that offered all that is best in this world. In 1934 he prepared a "Collected Works of Alexander Solzhenitsyn" in several school notebooks. It included prose and poetry. His approach to literature was comprehensive, and included the world of magazines and publishing. Also libraries and 'samizdat' [underground self-published works]. He is interested in all of it, the whole world of literature as a whole.

No one knew anything about these notebooks from his childhood and youth; he hadn't shown them to anyone. He didn't even want me to mention them in my book. He thought it was all a bunch of garbage that couldn't withstand criticism from an aesthetic point of view. But I looked at these works from his childhood as signposts in his development as a writer—in the development of his self-consciousness as a writer, and this perspective bore fruit. When I suddenly realized, for example, that when he wrote "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich," that this wasn't the debut of a beginner, that this was a writer with thirty years of solid work behind him that no one knew anything about. That was what explained the greatness of his attainment. Thirty years of constant writing things down or learning them by heart (when writing was impossible). Thirty years of dedicated, ceaseless, fanatical labor as writer, essayist and analyst.



From the very beginning it was clear to me that it was absolutely essential that Solzhenitsyn read what I had written. I myself asked him to look through the text to see if it had the texture of authenticity. I said to him, “Without your help my book will be as if blind and lame. I am a person from a different era. I didn’t participate in the war. I was never arrested, never did time in the camps, never experienced exile. My life so far has mostly avoided the worst kinds of hard knocks. I will make a hash of all the details of daily life in the military, or in the prison camps. And the mistakes that I make will create that fund of inaccuracies and errors that others will lambaste me for and in the end will undermine the whole book.”

He finally agreed, and he read through my book, but only for the purpose of correcting inaccuracies as they pertain to facts, names and dates. He didn’t permit himself to make any comments as regards the book’s structure, chapter headings or subject matter. I have a whole stack of papers with Solzhenitsyn’s notes on them. What sorts of corrections did he make? Here is an example. I’m describing the scene in an NKVD prison after Solzhenitsyn’s arrest in 1945, and I write that the arrestee “was handed prison garb to put on.” Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote in the margin: “No. Lubyanka was the only pre-trial prison in the country where they let you keep your civilian clothes.” For a biographer, details like that are just priceless. After all, lots of people have done time in Lubyanka, and every one of them would have shouted out, “But that’s not true!” And if you get things wrong in the details, then it must mean that you got the big things wrong as well. The same sorts of things came up as regards Solzhenitsyn’s time in the military and in the labor camps.

My book was published on March 5, 2008, while the protagonist of the book was still alive. We even managed to celebrate together. On the copy that I presented to Solzhenitsyn I wrote the following: “To my dear Alexander Isaevich Solzhenitsyn, the hero of this book, in celebration of the unimaginable, yet nonetheless now real joy of having been its author.”

If one is to judge on the basis of the book reviews that appeared both at home and abroad, the biography’s reception by the world of academic experts was incredibly favorable. I had been prepared to defend the book, to present additional evidence wherever necessary, and to that end had prepared a store of crushing arguments. I figured I was in for some stormy times. Instead I was met with a wave of understanding and sympathy. The literary world confirmed Solzhenitsyn’s inarguable right to have his biography written while he was still living. They judged the book to be accurate and truthful. Within a year of its first publication the book went into three reprintings, received four prestigious awards, and was being translated into foreign languages. A new edition will soon come out that takes into consideration Solzhenitsyn’s death and burial, and the enormous number of publications that appeared both during the country’s farewell to him and on the occasion of his 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary. I am still today receiving letters from readers, along with additional materials and accounts. As the years pass, and after Solzhenitsyn’s enormous correspondence is published, and the memoirs of people close to him get published, and the secret archives become open and available, an expanded and corrected version of the book will become necessary. I am certain that in the end we will be in possession of a full, scholarly biography of Solzhenitsyn, a Russian classic of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**Bacich:** Thank you very much, Ms. Saraskina.

Our next speaker is Adriano Dell’Asta. Professor Dell’Asta graduated in Philosophy at the Catholic University of Milan. He currently teaches Russian Language and Literature at the Catholic University in Brescia and in Milan, Italy, as an Associate Professor in Russian Language and Literature.

In the course of his career he has published extensively, and he is the author of several books on thinkers such as Berdjaev and novelists such as Bulgakov, Solov’ëv and Babel.

He is a member of the Ambrosian Academy's Class of Slavistics, vice-President of the "Russia Cristiana" foundation and a member of the international scientific committee of the journal "La Nuova Europa"; he is also part of the advisory committees to the international theological journal *Communio*, and to the journal of the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile, *Humanitas*. So without any further ado, I introduce to you Professor Dell'Asta.

**Dell'Asta:** Good afternoon. I'm deeply regretful that I can't speak your language, but I don't want to ruin it. And then I know that I have a good translator. I want to thank all the friends at Crossroads for inviting me here and giving me the opportunity to speak of something so important as the author Solzhenitsyn. Crossroads gives us the opportunity to speak about beauty in its most serious sense now in a time when the world is always more in crisis.

One of the greatest theologians of the 20th Century, von Balthasar, said that if all of the books of that century, the 20th Century, were at risk of disappearing, that book which absolutely had to be saved first and foremost was *The Gulag Archipelago* of Alexander Solzhenitsyn. It was a recognition of a greatness that today is clear for everybody, but which has reasons that are not always so clear and therefore we can spend time deepening this evening.

Many people, right after Solzhenitsyn's death, said that his greatness came from the denunciation of Soviet concentration camps. By revealing their existence and their monstrosity, he would have contributed in a decisive manner to the fall of totalitarianism. This is a very partial idea which is historical not really exact, and certainly misses the point. Historically it's not true that Solzhenitsyn revealed the existence of these camps as he himself said on many occasions. Many others before him had done so, but their denunciation of those camps remained ineffective. Solzhenitsyn was not great because he had denounced the existence of concentration camps in the Soviet Union, but rather because he had shown how it was possible to hold out in these camps and remain human. It was really in virtue of this rediscovery of an irreducible humanity that his work then assumed decisive value for the denunciation of a Soviet totalitarianism and in its defeat.

One of the elements which was most characteristic of the 20th Century was the attempt, which was common to both Nazi and Communist totalitarianism, to reduce man to nothing, to deprive man of his liberty, of his dignity and of his very reality, taking from him physical life and then eliminating even the memory of his existence. It's exactly in front of this radical attempt to nullify man that we can draw a contrast with one of those themes which is most repeated in Solzhenitsyn, the idea of the irreducibility of man. It's the idea that really there, right there where it seems that man has reached the very bottom, the very depths of inhumanity and the lie, man can still remain himself indeed discover within himself an unimaginable strength, a strength that is not made by man himself.

Look, for Solzhenitsyn, man's hands, man's work, has not made the infinitely great nor the infinitely miniscule in nature, nor that infinite surprise of the human soul. Because we can even dominate the world, but in the morning when we wake up, we can't help but be surprised to still be here. We're surprised that we haven't disappeared in the night. We can still be surprised that there are things, that there is being instead of nothingness.

Here we're speaking of that same surprise that is born in the figure of Matryona, the protagonist of the story *Matryona's Home*. Who is Matryona? She's an old, stupid woman who works for everybody without getting paid, who in the past has even been marked by some kind of guilt that makes her anything but a saint. And yet in reality she's much more than this. The townspeople are forced to realize this when she dies. All of those who considered Matryona to be a nothing instead discovered that Matryona was the just one. "The just one without which neither the village nor the city nor our land lives." This surprise appears again in *One Day in the Life of*

*Ivan Denisovich*, the remarkable figure of U-81, an old detainee without a name. Better, one who is defined only by the number that's on his uniform - U-81, with the intent of depersonalizing him as deeply as possible. And yet Solzhenitsyn says, "Among all of those curbed backs, he distinguished himself by carrying himself erectly. He was as if chiseled in hardened stone; his head never bent into the bowl like everybody else's. His head he always carried high." In the middle of such violence and in such meaninglessness which would seem to erase every human value and every stable point of human social life, "this old man persists in remaining always that one of the time before." And the reason was clear: "If his eyes didn't go running back and forth through the mess hall" it was because he had conserved something that was "indestructible," something that was "sublime" with which he could compare himself. It was a point that he could look to, to look up at, "his eyes could fix on something that was invisible" something that was above the heads of everyone, all the detainees and all the guards.

Something that was invisible and yet manifests itself, whether it be the human soul or its creator, or its existence, inextinguishable and efficacious, surprising in this world made of things that are unstable and mean, it manifests itself in a clear way.

Notwithstanding all of the violence of the totalitarian power and the pressures of the dominant mentality in this world which we say is a free world, the reality of the soul never lets itself be definitively annulled. Hence man finds himself defined by the relationship with the infinite, with an absurd and yet unyielding thirst for the infinite and for immortality that man himself cannot give himself or have the pretense to maintain by himself. And this desire for the infinite is what allows man to withstand the lie, that lie with which the power of the regimes would always like to reduce the person to its own projects. This is the second great reason for Solzhenitsyn's greatness.

Man always remains man even in the worst situations. The second reason is the discovery of the central role of the ideological lie and its denunciation is its second characteristic. Solzhenitsyn says, "In order for man to do something evil, first of all he has to feel it as something that's good or legitimate. The nature of man, thankfully, is that he feels the need to seek justifications for his actions. The reasons for Macbeth's actions were fragile and remorse killed him. Ideology, she is the one who gives the justifications for evil. We need a social theory that allows us to justify ourselves in front of ourselves and in front of others." But the genius of Solzhenitsyn isn't only in his denunciation of the totalitarian lie and its central role. He was also capable, as few were, to reveal the totally new characteristics of this particular kind of lie regarding all the other lies that came before it.

The totalitarian lie is not that traditional Machiavellian lie. That lie recognizes still the difference between what is true and what is false. It's precisely that ideological lie for which truth and falsehood, good and evil no longer exist as such. They are ideologically reinvented every day to such a point that there is no longer any relationship with reality. The fact that in the 20th Century there were produced victims in numbers that were never before seen doesn't depend in the final analysis on the availability of new instruments of violence, nor does it depend on the evil application of ideas that were in themselves good, that had just been spoiled by the wickedness or defects of human beings, nor did it depend exclusively on the appearance of monstrously evil or wicked ideas. Here we're no longer dealing with a battle between varying ideas of reality, but a battle between reality and a fantasy that wants to take its place, an ideological fantasy that wants to eliminate authentic reality. The novelty of the ideological evil consists exactly in the pretense it has that an idea can eliminate and should eliminate reality itself. One's enemy can be squashed as if he were a bug because there's no longer anyone that can imagine that he isn't a bug, but is a human being. There is no longer reality but that which power thinks about reality. In the world there are no longer things which all of us see, but only that which the power sees and then according to how the power sees it and decides that its meaning must be given. In the Soviet Union the death penalty was reintroduced by Lenin already in 1918, but already by 1927 it was no longer being called "the death penalty" by anyone. But it became simply a measure of social defense. As I was saying before, before killing someone without having too much guilt, all you have to do is have the idea that he's no longer a human being;

he's an insect, an unnatural being, a being that goes against the idea of nature that the regime imposes upon its subjects. It's not by chance that the Nazi barbarism called the sexual relationships between an Arian person and a non-Arian person "incest." That is, in order to eliminate millions of human beings, he needed to convince people that they were in some way unnatural.

In the same way, in the Soviet concentration camps millions died, but beginning in 1929 they start to be called simply "camps for correctional work," camps that were meant to re-educate by means of work. Also here it's not by chance that a few years before in an internal document of the SS, while speaking of Rudolph Hoess in one of his activities as the camp commandant of Auschwitz from 1940 to 1943 it says, "Hoess was not only a good commandant of the camp, but in this type of work he even distinguished himself by bringing new ideas and new educational methods."

In the Soviet Union as well as in Nazi Germany, these two fundamental realities for the life of man which are work and education, ceased to be that which they are; work becomes for the Nazis, *Arbeit macht frei* – "work will set you free." At the same time, education ceases to be that which most people mean when they say the word education. Education is no longer a means by which you introduce a person to reality, no longer a way of introducing a person to stay in front of the infinite richness of reality. Education becomes the elimination of reality by means of its extermination. Hoess becomes a new teacher of new educational methods.

And here we're at the heart of ideology. It's this common heart that belongs to both the Soviet and Nazi totalitarianisms. This isn't a deviation which forms in the time of Stalin in communism. Already in Lenin as Solzhenitsyn shows, it's already present; it's already there. When in a letter in May of 1922 to the Commissary of the People for Justice, Kurskij, Lenin was explaining that in the new penal code that they were proposing there had to be extremely harsh punishments even if they had already passed that time of the civil war, even up to capital punishment, for whom? For who can "objectively help" or "who can help" the international bourgeoisie. What matters is not what you do or what you can do, but what I think you might do. Solzhenitsyn says with his typical irony, "Give me St. Augustine and I'll throw him into prison as well. I can make him fit this code." It's the beginning of this concept in the Soviet Union of the objective enemy. By means of such an idea the people become the enemy of themselves.

So the elimination of reality is a structural necessity for ideology, and this is another fundamental aspect of Solzhenitsyn, ideology is presented not as a form of power upon reality but as the pretense to be able to create a new reality. Totalitarianism is no longer conceived of as a form of government in the political or institutional way of thinking about the form of government. That classic version, the idea was to control and to kind of direct society. But rather totalitarianism has the characteristic of a pretense, like a pseudo religious pretense to reconstruct and re-found the world according to a messianic vision of history. It doesn't limit itself to destroying its enemy; it must change him. And so Solzhenitsyn, one who suffered in the first person the reality of the Stalinist camps, doesn't have any doubts. He says, "The current state system today in our country is terrifying, not because it's anti-democratic or authoritarian or because it's based on physical constraints...but that which differentiates our system from all the systems that came before is that beyond just physical and economic constraints, our system demands from us a complete surrender of our soul." This was Solzhenitsyn's greatness. He understood that what was at stake was the soul of man. That which every regime wants to destroy is the morality of man. It wants to touch, change the consciousness, the heart of man.

And so now we can finally get to the true reason for Solzhenitsyn's greatness. Escaping from the ideological lie and from the radical negation of humanity isn't possible if one stays on the level of pure ideas. It's not enough to oppose an ideology with another idea, perhaps with a richer idea. In this way we would still remain prisoners of the ideological dialectics. And so, proceeding in this manner, we would still be prisoners of that principle by which that which decides the truth and the reality of things is simply an idea. Did you hear how Solzhenitsyn talked about the value of experience? So what do we do if one does not want to propose his own new

ideological truth? What does one do? You can't simply say, okay, there is no truth. Because at this point it means that you're surrendering yourself to the ideological lie. So what do you do? What's needed is to escape from this dialectic of the primacy of the idea and find again the principle of reality, find again the truth of reality in reality, and not as something which man has to introduce by force. Rather the truth which is something there inside reality, not made by the hand of man. Indeed Solzhenitsyn escaped from this dialectic exactly by rediscovering reality as something not made by the hand of man. In fact, this is how he understands his own work. He says about himself and his work, "It is not I who dream up or carry out everything. I am only a word made sharp to smite the unclean forces, an enchanted sword to cleave and disperse them."

His was an escape that was even more firm and clear from the ideological dialectics exactly because it came about not by means of a new language, but rather by means of an artistic form with the images, with the figures, with the architectural forms of his novels. What is captured are these beings that we find to be victorious exactly in the moment of their defeat. Exactly in that moment when all of their human energies fail, when everything is lost, when everything seems nothingness, they discover you to be like Matryona, "the just one without which neither the village nor the city nor all of our land can live."

This is incredible. There is this passage in *The Gulag Archipelago*. This is his work which was really most filled with a political denunciation and a denunciation of political ideologies. He says this, "So let the reader who expects this book to be a political expose slam its covers shut right now. If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart...From good to evil is one quaver, says the proverb, and therefore, correspondingly, from evil to good."

In these last two quotes, we shouldn't miss something. Proverbs or folkways, popular ways of expressing things, is a characteristic that is absolutely typical of the artist Solzhenitsyn. We also know that he loved to collect and put into his notebooks an infinite number of these proverbs. And so where ideology offers only the sterile dialectic juxtaposition between its abstract truths or simply the complete absence of truth, but this is even how it is right now in the modern world. Either we like to oppose, to juxtapose abstract truths, or to say simply, there is no truth. Here, right here, Solzhenitsyn has this intuition. In the proverb he discovers a new form of truth, a truth that doesn't want to give up putting itself forward. Nonetheless it's not created by the individual. Rather the proverb is the fruit of a verified experience over the centuries by a people.

The greatness of Solzhenitsyn is all in his capacity to overcome ideology not with another idea but with an experience that throws one back to the heart of man, that "line dividing good and evil [which] cuts through the heart of every human being." This doesn't depend on a political conception or some kind of system of power, but on the heart, the availability of the heart to be sensible to the desire for the infinite, that desire which all of us have just because we are alive for one instant. This availability doesn't depend on an ideology or some particular virtue. We shouldn't forget that Matryona was not a woman of exceptional moral virtues. Here everything plays itself out at the level of experience and at the availability of the heart to listen to experience. Solzhenitsyn wasn't a sentimental romantic. You saw when he spoke about that revolt in the concentration camp what he said about himself. He had lived the experience of the camps and he had seen how in the camps you die physically and how you die spiritually. He saw how in the camps people would live and die and kill for a piece of bread. But he saw something else in the camps as well. In the exhibition that we presented in Rimini with Ms. Saraskina there was an exhibit which presented a rosary made of cork. This was a rosary that he constructed because he wanted to be able to pray in the camp. When his wife sent this cork rosary to us, she told us something more. There was another rosary that he had made when he was in the camp that she was in possession of but she couldn't send because it was just too fragile. It was made out of bread crusts. In order to understand his experience in all its complexity, we have to have in mind this set of rosary beads made out of bread crumbs, this rosary made out of bread crumbs that a detainee had made for himself in a camp where one

died and killed for pieces of bread. And then with this rosary made out of bread, he didn't even keep it for himself; he sent it along to someone else, his wife. When we say that Solzhenitsyn is great, he's great because he showed that man can remain himself, can remain a human being in any situation; we have in mind exactly this rosary and the experience which is at its root.

The greatness of Solzhenitsyn is exactly in his capacity to recount to us an experience of true life. He didn't give us an idea. An idea, as the fathers of the Church have already said, is something that can be battled against by thousands of words. Only life cannot be battled against with thousands of words, and it's this life that Solzhenitsyn told us. Thank you.

**Bacich:** I just want to thank you, Ms. Saraskina, for coming all the way from Russia, and thank Professor Dell'Asta for coming all the way from Italy. What strikes me so much about this man Solzhenitsyn, and why I'm so glad to have been here this evening is exactly what Professor Dell'Asta ended with, the promise of a different kind of life even in the face of a terrible power, a power that even if the 20<sup>th</sup> Century has passed, does not abate in our lives.