



Abbaye Saint-Joseph de Clairval

F – 21150 Flavigny-sur-Ozerain

March 25, 2009
Annunciation of Our Lord

Dear Friend of Saint Joseph Abbey,

“ **W**HEN no one listens to me anymore, God still listens to me. When I can no longer talk to anyone or call upon anyone, I can always talk to God. ... During thirteen years in jail, in a situation of seemingly utter hopelessness, the fact that Cardinal Nguyen Van Thuan could listen and speak to God became for him an increasing power of hope, which enabled him, after his release, to become for people all over the world a witness to hope—to that great hope which does not wane even in the nights of solitude (Encyclical *Spe salvi*, November 30, 2007, no. 32). In these few words, Pope Benedict XVI described the essential character of the Cardinal’s life.

Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan was born on April 17, 1928, near Huê, the former capital of Annam. His father’s and mother’s families were not of the same social status—businessmen and merchants on his father’s side ; high-ranking mandarins on his mother’s side. But for generations, members of both families had distinguished themselves for their Catholic faith and love of country. Many had been martyred. For more than two centuries, in fact, between 1644 and 1888, waves of violent persecutions had martyred about 150,000. These memories remained vivid in both families, sustaining their faith.

Thuan was particularly proud of his mother’s family. Ngo Dinh Kha, his mother’s father, had been one of the few Catholics to hold an important post in the Imperial Court in Vietnam. He had six sons and three daughters, to whom he passed on his life’s passion : “ God desires Vietnam’s independence.” His daughter Hiep (Elizabeth, born in 1903, who would become Thuan’s mother) helped keep the Ngo Dinh family united in faith and in their desire to help Vietnam achieve independence. In 1955, Diem, Kha’s third son, would become the President of the new Republic of Vietnam.

Nguyen Van Am and Hiep, his wife, married in 1924, had already been tried by the illness and death of their eldest son, Xuan. Hiep named her second son—who would be followed by seven other children—“ Thuan ” (“ Will of God ”). Thuan had a happy childhood. Much loved by his uncles Thuc and Diem, he was full of affection and admiration for them. At the age of 13, Thuan asked his parents for permission to continue his studies at the minor seminary in An Ninh, where his uncle Thuc, who had become a priest, then a bishop, had been trained. At An Ninh, a center of Catholic resistance against persecutions, the portrait of Ngo Dinh Kha was displayed with reverence. The sem-

inary was run by the Fathers of the Foreign Missions of Paris, whose numbers included several Vietnamese priests. These professors sowed in Thuan’s soul the seeds of a true devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary and gave him sure teachers—the Curé d’Ars, Thérèse of Lisieux, and Francis Xavier, his patron saint.

The horrors of war

World War II, France’s defeat, and Japan’s temporary victory, all came unexpectedly. In the summer of 1943, Thuan’s uncle Diem began to teach the 15-year-old political strategy. However, Thuan was more interested in reading the lives of the saints—particularly that of Theophane Venard—and praying the Rosary. Every morning he went to Mass and received Communion. When he returned to the seminary, he with ease studied Latin as well as Chinese literature, which had shaped Vietnam.

In March 1945, Japan took control of Vietnam. But several days after this sudden show of force, the residents of Huê saw red flags waving throughout the city—the first sign of the Communist “ liberation front ”. Ngo Dinh Khoi, the eldest of Thuan’s uncles and a declared enemy of the Communists, was arrested on August 31 and executed by them a few weeks later with his only son, as a traitor to his country. Thuan was overcome with fury—forgiveness seemed impossible to him. He felt the same anguish again in 1963-64, when killings and executions annihilated his family, and again in 1975, at the beginning of his imprisonment. Learning to master his anger would be a long and difficult process for him. In contemplating the example of JESUS CHRIST, he understood that loving those who committed cruel offenses against him is not optional, yet his heart remained closed to all forgiveness. Providence then brought to his attention the example of Father Pro, a Mexican Jesuit who was arrested and executed in

November 1927 by his country's Communist government, and who died forgiving his executioners. In the fall of 1947, Thuan entered the major seminary in Phu Xuan. He fed himself on Saint Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*, as well as Father Garrigou-Lagrange's masterpiece, *The Three Ages of the Interior Life*. At this time, he also came to know *The Imitation of Christ* and *The Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, works to which he would remain devoted for the rest of his life.

The shepherd faces the wolves

On June 11, 1953, Thuan was ordained a priest by Bishop Urrutia in Huê. Three months later, he was diagnosed with advanced tuberculosis. He was rushed to the main hospital in Huê. At their son's bedside, Thuan's parents spent hours praying the Rosary with him. Transferred to Saigon, he was admitted to the French military hospital in April 1954. The doctors decided to remove a lung. The morning scheduled for the operation, during the last X-ray before administering general anesthesia—amazement! No trace of tuberculosis! "It's a miracle!" Thuan joyously exclaimed. Four days later, in perfect health he returned to Huê. At the same time, the radio announced the fall of Dien Bien Phu. In July, in spite of protests by the new government's leader Ngo Dinh Diem, the Geneva Accords were signed and the country was divided in two. The Communists controlled the North. In October 1955, the South was declared a Republic, with Diem as its first president. Almost a million North Vietnamese, many of them Catholic, fled to the South. It was at this time that Thuan's bishop sent him to Rome, where he spent four years studying at the College for the Propagation of the Faith. During his vacations he traveled throughout Europe. In August 1957, in front of the Grotto in Lourdes, he whispered, not entirely aware of what he was saying, "In the name of Your Son and in your name, Mary, I accept any trials or suffering..." He returned to Vietnam in 1959.

The following year, John XXIII established a Vietnamese ecclesial hierarchy. At the same time, the faculty board elected Thuan the head of the minor seminary. Three years later, on November 1, 1963, a group of generals launched a coup. Diem refused to use the presidential guard and tried to negotiate. It was a failure. The next day, November 2, on his way to Mass and confession, he was assassinated with his brother Nhu. Six months later, Can, Diem's brother, fell into the hands of rebel generals; he was executed on May 8, 1964. Thuan was living a nightmare—four uncles murdered, two others in exile, his parents' health ruined, Vietnam's independence in danger. But Providence came to his assistance—he was named vicar general, a responsibility that took his mind off his troubles. In April 1967, Paul VI named him bishop of Nha Trang.

Located on the coast, about 250 miles from Saigon, the diocese of Nha Trang numbered 1,160,000 inhabitants at that time, among whom 130,000 were Catholics. Thuan was consecrated a bishop in Huê, on June 24. In 1968, in the course of the Viet Cong's "Tet Offensive", it became apparent that the Communists might gain control of South Vietnam, in spite of the American presence. Bishop Thuan decided to step up, in addition to the formation of lay parishioners, pastoral care for vocations. In the space of eight years, the number of major seminarians in his diocese went from 42 to 147; the number of minor seminarians rose from 200 to 500. In April 1975, the bishop ordained the last large class of seminarians, shortly before the Communists took control of Nha Trang. The diocese was strong enough to deal with the restrictions. One by one, the Viet Cong occupied the most important cities. Thousands of people headed South, with their sick and elderly. Bishop Thuan chartered planes to parachute tons of medicine and food to these needy refugees. In doing so, he attracted the Communists' hostility. He knew it, but he was doing his duty as a bishop. On April 23, he learned that Pope VI had named him the Archbishop of Saigon's coadjutor (auxiliary with right to succession). Without dwelling on the dramatic consequences this decision would have for him, Bishop Thuan set off for the southern capital at the beginning of May.

"God alone, and not His works!"

In Saigon, influential Catholics, rallying against the Communists, encouraged him to return to Nha Trang, for the Communists could never accept a member of Ngo Dinh's family as Archbishop of Saigon. On August 13, Bishop Thuan received an order to present himself at to the former presidential palace where he was pressed to confess that he was the agent of a Vatican conspiracy. When he admitted nothing, he was put in a car and taken by night to a village near Nha Trang. There, he was placed under house arrest in the home of the parish priest and forbidden to communicate with anyone under threat of retaliation against the diocese. Soon, his inability to act for God and for souls began to make his bishop's heart suffer. During his sleepless nights, he was tempted to resentment against his enemies. His prayer seemed ineffective.

Reflecting on Saint Paul's captivity in Rome, he decided to write letters to the faithful. Thus was born *The Road of Hope*. Printed anonymously, the work soon found its way into the hands of many faithful, even in France and the United States. Infuriated, the authorities transferred Bishop Thuan to the camp in Phu Khanh on March 19, 1976, the feast of Saint Joseph. He was locked in a tiny windowless cell, filled with mold and fungus because of the dampness; there he stayed nine

months without ever coming out, without meeting any fellow prisoners. Bit by bit isolation did its work: “Many confused feelings swam in my head,” he would later write; “sadness, fear, nervous tension. My heart was broken by the separation from my people... I was unable to sleep, tormented by the thought of all the works I had taken on for God going to ruin, and my being rebelled against it. One night, a voice said to me, in the depths of my heart: ‘Why are you tormenting yourself like this? You must distinguish between God and God’s works. Everything you have undertaken and that you want to continue to do is excellent—these are God’s works, but they aren’t God! If God wants you to abandon all that, do it right away and put your trust in Him. He will do things infinitely better than you... You have chosen God alone, and not His works!’ This light brought me a new peace, which helped me overcome moments that were physically almost unbearable.”

To love, even in prison

This changed his attitude towards his imprisonment. Fixing his eyes on Christ on the cross, he realized that it was at the moment He was weakest, *despised and rejected by men* (Is. 53 :3), that He performed the greatest act of His life, the redemption of the world. He, Thuan, could no longer perform works for God, but no jail, no jailer could keep him from loving God! On November 29, 1976, he was taken to a work camp in the mountains of North Vietnam. There he managed to have a Christian send him a little wine, disguised as a “remedy for stomachaches,” and a few small fragments of bread hidden in a flashlight. He began celebrating Mass in secret. From then on, he continually experienced Christian joy. He gave communion to Catholics in prison with him. Through his openness and kindness, he gained accomplices even among his guards. As a result, he was transferred to a stricter prison close to Hanoi, and later, on May 13, 1978, to the dilapidated presbytery in a village named Giang Xa, whose parishioners no longer practiced and harbored anti-Catholic sentiments. Bishop Thuan was given permission to celebrate Mass, but alone—he could not speak to anyone. Nevertheless, a fortuitous encounter revealed that some villagers were his relations by marriage. From then on, the parishioners understood that they had been lied to, and changed their attitude towards him.

The Communists had spent long years developing a network of spies even within the parishes of North Vietnam. Giang Xa had its spies, a couple that the parishioners called “the saints.” Through gentleness and kindness, Bishop Thuan eventually won them over—with obvious sincerity, they asked him to hear their confessions. Then, with the consent of the Archbishop of Hanoi, he lifted their excommunication. It was a contagious example—a number of informants

from other villages came to him to be reconciled with God and the Church. Worried about the calm that had taken over the country parishes, the government realized what happened—the network had been neutralised. At dawn on November 5, 1982, Bishop Thuan disappeared, taken away in a police van... He was taken to where no one would dream of looking for him—a residence for public security agents! The bishop was forbidden to leave his room, to speak to anyone, or look out the window. This would be his fate for the six years that followed. But he had abandoned himself to God—solitude no longer frightened him. By dint of persevering kindness, he succeeded in communicating with his guards and obtaining humane treatment. Disarmed by this “corruption of the innocents,” the authorities decided after several months to transfer Bishop Thuan to a prison in Hanoi, where he began to celebrate Mass again: the Eucharist was his strength.

Through a security guard, he learned that John Paul II had received a request from the bishops of Vietnam for their country’s martyrs to be canonized. This development made impossible his release, which had been foreseen at one time. A little later, Bishop Thuan learned that the government, impressed by John Paul II’s determination to canonize 117 Vietnamese martyrs in June 1988, allowed some protests to be organized. In his cell, he chanted the *Te Deum*. The thought that he might share the fate of these martyrs gave him courage and strength. He offered himself to God to endure, if He wished, imprisonment until his death.

“Thou hast loosed my bonds” (Ps. 115:16)

On November 21, 1988, the Feast of the Presentation of MARY, a telephone rang in the corridor. Bishop Thuan made this prayer: “Mother, if my presence in this prison is useful to the Church, give me the grace to die here. But if I can still serve the Church in any other way, allow me to be freed.” He had just finished his modest meal when the door to his cell was opened violently: “Prepare yourself! We are going to a very high-ranking government official!”—“I am ready.” During the trip, he learned that he was going to be received by the minister of the interior, Mai Chi Tho. The minister welcomed him in a luxurious salon and had him ceremoniously served tea without saying a word. Then, bending toward Thuan: “What is your relation to Ngo Dinh Diem?”—“I am his nephew.” After a moment of silence: “You know, during the war, Diem was identified with the United States. Now he doesn’t create any problems for us anymore... We must no longer look toward the past, but for what each of us can do for our country.” He looked at Thuan and smiled. “What do you wish for today?”—“I wish to be free!”—“And when would you like to be freed?” Thuan gathered up all his courage. “Today!” Tho

tensed up. “I have been in prison for too long,” Thuan continued, “three pontificates, four Soviet secretariats—that’s a lot!” Tho burst out in resounding laughter: “That’s true!” He gave his orders, then stood up and shook Thuan’s hand. On the way from the prison to the archbishop’s house in Hanoi, where he was assigned to live, Bishop Thuan, frantic with gratitude, thanked his heavenly Mother: “Holy MARY, you have given me my freedom! Tell me what I must do now.”

After a few weeks, Bishop Thuan asked for a visa to visit his parents in Australia and to meet the Pope in Rome. Surprisingly, he was granted one. During his papal audience, the prelate was touched to learn that Pope John Paul II had closely followed his years in captivity. As he roamed through the city, he asked himself, “Why am I here? God has preserved my life. What does He want of me now?” On his return to Vietnam, the same conditions of restricted liberty were imposed on him. Considering the advanced age of the archbishop of Saigon and that Bishop Thuan was still officially his coadjutor, Bishop Thuan could at any minute become one of the leading prelates of the Church in Vietnam. The government wished to avoid that at all costs—yet, on the other hand, it was reluctant to tarnish the image of “national renewal” that it strove to give the world. In December 1989, one month after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the minister of the interior informed the assembled bishops that the government would not accept Bishop Thuan’s election to any position of authority. Embarrassed by this “situation,” the government finally suggested to the prelate in 1991 that

he “go spend some time in Rome.” Plainly put, it was a one-way ticket. Bishop Thuan accepted this suggestion only after receiving the Holy See’s approval. He left Vietnam in December; in March 1992, he learned that any request to return would be denied.

A consoling certainty

During the first two years of his exile, Bishop Thuan devoted his time to serving Vietnamese emigrants. His books, more and more widely read, were translated into many languages. Before long, he was being invited to speak at retreats and conferences in the leading European nations. In April 1994, John Paul II named him vice-president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, whose primary responsibilities are to spread the social doctrine of the Church throughout the world and to promote respect for human rights. On February 2, 1997, the prelate put the finishing touches on his book *Five Loaves and Two Fishes*, in which he published for the first time some of the most poignant memories of his years of imprisonment. In December 1999, the Pope chose Bishop Thuan to direct the spiritual exercises for the Roman Curia for the following March, inviting him to draw primarily from his personal experiences. At the close of this retreat, John Paul II declared: “Archbishop Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan ... has strengthened us in the consoling certainty that when everything collapses around us and perhaps even within us, Christ remains our unfailing support.” One year later, on February 21, 2001, the prelate was elevated to the College of Cardinals.

The new cardinal celebrated the Easter Triduum in Boston; a few days later he underwent surgery there. Suffering from a rare form of cancer, he lived “from day to day,” not concerning himself with leaving any particular legacy. One of his last homilies, given in memory of an Italian political leader, closes with these words: “Blessed is the leader who fears neither the truth nor the media, for on the day of Judgment, it will be to God alone that he must answer, not to the people or the media.” The Cardinal passed away on September 16, 2002. “During his last days, when he could no longer speak,” Pope John Paul II recounted, “he fixed his gaze on the Crucifix before him. He prayed in silence while he consummated his last sacrifice Now ... we can truly say that *his hope was full of immortality* (cf. Wis. 3:4,5). It was full of Christ, the life and resurrection of all who trust in Him.”

Blessed Hope, be the *anchor of our souls* (cf. Heb. 6:19)!

Dom Antoine Parize
o.s.b.

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