

## Profile of the late Cardinal Francis-Xavier Nguyễn Văn Thuận

# Strength in Weakness

### Hubertus Blaumeiser

*The late Vietnamese Cardinal Francis Nguyễn Văn Thuận (1998 – 2002) is known worldwide. In 2000, John Paul II asked him to conduct the Roman Curia's annual retreat. His enduringly popular book, 'Witness of Hope' was a fruit of that retreat and has since been translated in fifteen languages. Both Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis have cited this witness to the faith in their speeches and documents<sup>1</sup>. The author briefly traces here the life of this great, modern-day figure from the Pauline perspective of "when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor 12:10), including his own personal experiences with the Cardinal.*

### Inner Freedom

How might we describe Cardinal Francis-Xavier Nguyễn Văn Thuận? Francis-Xavier Nguyễn Văn Thuận was a person who was truly free. He was free at the time of his arrest on August 15, 1975 and throughout his 13-year imprisonment and even in the moment in 2001 of his diagnosis with a grave illness.

In May 2002, while in Milan to undergo critical 20-hour surgery, I was able to ask him, "Are you not afraid?" "No!", he said, "Because there are three possible outcomes: either I die, which would be alright because I am ready; or I survive but will be a sick man forever; or I will be able to resume my work again. All three options are equally good."

Văn Thuận was not governed by life's external circumstances, which also explains his deeply joy-filled nature and endearing sense of humor that won over everyone.

### Deeply rooted in God

But where did his freedom and kindness have their roots? An explanation could be found in the words of Teresa of Avila which as a young bishop he had inscribed on his episcopal ring: "Todo pasa" – everything passes.

In a remarkable turn of events, his 1975 arrest led to a new and radical choice: God alone. For him it was a letting go of everything, including good things and noble initiatives he had

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<sup>1</sup> Benedict XVI, Encyclical *Spe Salvi*, 32; id., *Speech to the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace*, 17.9.2007; Francis, *Speech on the occasion of the closure of the diocesan phase of the process of beatification*, 6.7.2013; id., Apostolic Letter *Gaudete et exsultate*, 17; id., *Message for the World Day of Peace*, 1.1.2019, 3.

started as Bishop of Nha Trang. In reflecting on that period, he said:

*"One night, I heard a voice prompting me from the depths of my heart: 'Why do you torment yourself so? You have to distinguish between God and God's works. Everything you have done and want to continue doing (...) all these are excellent works, God's works, but they are not God! If God wants you to abandon all these works, putting them in His hands, do it immediately, and have confidence in Him. God will do it infinitely better than you; (...) You have chosen God alone, not His works.'*

From this moment on, a new peace filled my heart and stayed with me for 13 years. I felt my human weakness; I renewed this choice in the face of difficult situations and I never lacked peace."<sup>2</sup>

## **Love Without Measure**

This being rooted in God alone enabled Văn Thuận to love freely and unconditionally. He also lived a powerful experience during the first years of his imprisonment. In early December 1976 he was taken by ship from the south to the north of Vietnam with 1,500 other prisoners. They found themselves crowded together for several days in the hold of the ship: people from every background and faith, all chained together. There was an atmosphere of desperation and Văn Thuận was completely cut off from his diocese.

In that moment he understood: This ship and this prison were now his cathedral! All those prisoners, without exception, were God's people entrusted to him. He recalled:

*"On the ship and afterwards in the re-education camp, I had occasion to dialogue with the most varied people: ministers, members of parliament, high civil and military authorities ... with Buddhists, Brahmanists, Muslims, and people of different Christian denominations: In the abyss of my sufferings ... I never ceased loving everyone, I never shut anyone out of my heart."<sup>3</sup>*

He never made distinctions between people and was used to taking the first step towards others. I still remember the surprise of one seminary student – now a bishop – who had driven the Cardinal back to his residence. When they arrived, the archbishop invited him up to his apartment and began preparing a simple lunch for the both of them. This characteristic trait of his was one that endured. In assuming the role of Vice-President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace in 1994, and later as President, he remained a simple brother to everyone. This approachability earned him great popularity among the entire office staff, including those at more junior levels.

The fact that Nguyễn Văn Thuận never judged others, including those out to hurt him, was also very evident. During all the years I dealt with him, I never sensed in him any feeling of aggression or desire for revenge against those who had persecuted him in his homeland. Never once did he go into details of the suffering inflicted on him, nor did he ever, in any way, behave as a victim. Rather, he described his imprisonment as an experience with God, one that had helped him to understand the Gospel more deeply and to witness to it even

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<sup>2</sup> *Five Loaves and Two Fish*, 2000. p. 21f

<sup>3</sup> *Witness of Hope*, Città Nuova, Roma 2000, pp 107 & 124.

more convincingly.

## **Disarmed and Disarming**

He not only loved unconditionally, but was able to free others to love as well. A prime example of this was his relationship with his guards. He managed to grow closer to them and win them over. They, in turn, would later ignore official prison regulations in an extraordinary fashion, helping him to fashion what would later always remain as his episcopal cross and chain.

Văn Thuận described how this relationship with the guards came about: "One night, a thought came to me: *'Francis, you are still very rich. You have the love of Christ in your heart. Love them as Jesus has loved you.'* So, the next day I began to love them, to love Jesus in them, smiling, exchanging kind words. I begin sharing stories of my travels overseas and how other peoples live... This stimulated their curiosity and pushed them to ask me about many, many things. Little by little we became friends."<sup>4</sup>

One could say that the fact that Văn Thuận was disarmed and stripped of authority was what made him so disarming and this would eventually prove crucial in his release from prison. He describes what happened: "During the journey into the obscurity of being a prisoner, I prayed to Mary with all simplicity: *'Mother, if you see that I can no longer be useful to your church, grant me the grace of expending my life while in prison. Otherwise, allow me to leave prison on one of your feast days.'* On November 21, 1988, Feast of the Presentation of Mary in the Temple, Văn Thuận received a telephone call saying that the Vietnamese Minister of the Interior wanted to see him. On that occasion, the Minister asked him: *'Do you have a desire to express?'* . . . *'Yes sir. I want my freedom.'* *'When?'*, asked the Minister. *'Today,'* Văn Thuận said.

It was an unusual request. And Văn Thuận continued: *'Sir, I have been in prison for too long – under three pontificates: Paul VI, John Paul I and John Paul II, and also under four Secretary-Generals of the Soviet Communist Party: Brezhnev, Andropov, Chernenko, and Gorbachev!'* The Minister began to laugh and said to his Secretary: *'Do whatever is necessary to fulfill his request.'*"<sup>5</sup>

## **Spiritual Teacher and Witness**

With unwavering courage, Văn Thuận followed Christ's example of self-emptying love (Phil. 2) and strived to be firmly aware of his own actions so that they might consistently model that of his Teacher. His was a simple lifestyle devoid of all pretenses and lived for others. The majority of any personal income received was generously shared with charitable institutions in his native country. His style of clothes was simple and modest: he usually wore a nylon windbreaker over his suit jacket. He also took up residence at the San Calisto Palazzo in the Vatican, in an apartment no one else had wanted because it was originally made from the merger of two other, smaller units and was seemingly impractical in its layout. But, with minimal effort, Văn Thuận found ways to make it warm and welcoming.

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<sup>4</sup> *Five Loaves and Two Fish*, p. 50.

<sup>5</sup> *Witness of Hope*, pp 252-253.

Living a radical, Gospel-based lifestyle imbued his life with vitality and authenticity. Precisely because he was a brother to all and gave genuine witness, he was a true spiritual teacher: one who spoke from his own deep and personal experience. At the time of his death, at least forty priests and lay persons saw themselves as his spiritual sons and daughters.

Văn Thuận became better known in the later years of his life. The Curial Retreat held in 2000 not only caught the attention of Cardinals and Bishops in the Roman Curia but was immediately aired worldwide by the Zenith news agency. Văn Thuận had toiled day and night to prepare the retreat and I was privileged to assist him. Having collected all the materials he needed, the Cardinal weaved everything together using his own solid experiences, insights and personal convictions. Each talk was created as a kind of collage composed of both pre-prepared sections and handwritten pieces that had been worked and re-worked. "We are sitting here with scissors and glue," he told me during one of those days of preparation, "but in reality it is God who does it all". Rarely have I ever experienced such a profound awareness of both human powerlessness and divine power in a well-known public figure.

When he finished preparing a talk, for example, he often repeatedly reviewed and edited it further if it seemed to him to be not yet sufficiently 'beautiful' in its content. Văn Thuận was also not satisfied with merely expressing his thoughts, rather, his goal was to enchant and inspire persons with 'the good news'.

### **A Grain of wheat...**

At the Retreat for the Roman Curia, he shared his passionate yearning for "a change of mentality, a constant renewal of life through the Gospel, a true conversion". Pope John Paul II, who at the beginning of the Great Jubilee walked through the Holy Door with only the Gospel, was "the icon of the Roman Curia of the third millennium: a church which receives, lives, shares, and proclaims the Gospel of hope.", said Văn Thuận. <sup>6</sup>

During the last years of his life and ministry in Rome, the Cardinal travelled the world teaching the Gospel in its beauty and clarity to laity, priests and bishops, as well as its radicality and its power for being a catalyst of social change. He spoke to thousands of people in a Mexico, including nearly a thousand future priests in the Guadalajara seminary; in Monterey he held retreats for about 400 priests and retreats for bishops in Benin. For Văn Thuận, the Gospel was indeed the only hope for a world in which entire peoples are being targeted for exploitation, marginalization, and elimination.

With his death on September 16, 2002, his quest for renewal at the level of the Church and the world seemed destined for an abrupt end. Yet could not it be said that many of Cardinal Văn Thuận's concerns are now being addressed by Pope Francis through the path of reform and the renewal he is forging in the Church? In some ways, he is seemingly like that grain of wheat mentioned in the Gospel and to which Pope John Paul II also referred at his funeral: "The words Jesus proclaimed in the lead up to his Passion: 'Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains a single grain; but if it dies it bears much fruit (Jn 12:24)' very

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<sup>6</sup> *Witness of Hope*, p 90

aptly apply to him.”<sup>7</sup>

We conclude with a prayer written by Cardinal Văn Thuận which speaks to the crucified Jesus, echoing the thoughts and writings of Chiara Lubich with whom Văn Thuận had been in close contact since the early 1970’s:

*On the path of hope  
I follow your every step.  
(...)  
Your sorrowful steps  
on entering Jerusalem.  
Your solitary steps in front of the  
Praetorium.  
Your steps weighed down under the cross  
on the road to Calvary.  
Your failed steps, dead and buried in a tomb not your own.  
Stripped of everything,  
without clothes, without a friend.  
Abandoned even by your Father,  
but always submissive to your Father.  
(...)  
In you is all of Heaven with the Trinity,  
the whole world and all humanity.  
Your sufferings are mine.  
Mine are all the sufferings of men,  
Mine are all things in which there is neither  
peace, nor joy,  
nor beauty, nor comfort, nor friendliness.  
Mine are all the sadness, the delusions,  
the divisions, the abandonment, the disgraces.  
Whatever is yours, let it come to me  
because you have borne all,  
whatever is in my brothers, because you are in them.<sup>8</sup>*

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<sup>7</sup> John Paul II, *Homily for the Funeral of Cardinal François-Xavier Nguyễn Văn Thuận*, September 20, 2002.

<sup>8</sup> *Five Loaves and Two Fish*, pp. 81-82. Cf. C. Lubich, *Ho un solo sposo sulla terra*, in: *Scritti spirituali/1*, Città Nuova, Roma 1991, p. 45.