

Venerable Cardinal Van Thuận: Promoter of Justice and Peace¹

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It is an honour to reflect on the life of Cardinal François Xavier Nguyen Van Thuận, my illustrious predecessor as President of the then Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (1998-2002), which has since merged into the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development.

It is no coincidence that the large conference room of our Dicastery bears his name, and that the foundation supporting our service to integral human development is dedicated to him. Nor is it a coincidence that the Dicastery is the promoter of his Cause for beatification. Through his life and his heroic witness, Cardinal Van Thuận continues to enlighten and inspire our work. For he was not merely *a promoter* of justice and peace but, through his profoundly prophetic and self-sacrificing life, he *embodied* these values in word and action.

When a priest in Huê, he volunteered as a chaplain in hospitals, prisons, and leper colonies. His commitment to those struggling with leprosy lasted a lifetime, involving people and institutions to build centres for lepers, and donating whatever he could save by living with great frugality.

As Bishop of Nha Trang, Van Thuận launched numerous educational and social initiatives, and worked tirelessly for reconciliation in a divided country. His Pastoral Letters insisted that “the Church must be incarnate,” and he exhorted the faithful to “live among the people and share their sufferings and humiliations [...]. Justice [...] requires that each party put themselves in the other’s shoes.”²

Justice towards all, and empathy with everyone, began in the bishop’s residence. “After meals,” tells the biography to be published soon, “he, the bishop, would clear the table, take the dishes to the kitchen, thank the nuns working there, show interest in the work they were doing and ensure they were not overburdened.”

¹ On the 50th anniversary of the publication of the book *The Road of Hope*, which brings together the 1,001 reflections which Văn Thuận addressed to his flock during his 13 years of imprisonment (1975–1988).

² Cf. F.-X. Nguyen Van Thuận, *Lettere Pastorali*, pp. 84-98.

Even in captivity, Van Thuận maintained this attitude towards the other prisoners, Christians and non-Christians alike, and even towards his prison guards.

What gave him strength in his greatest trials, was the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In the Gospel, Van Thuận learned how to promote reconciliation, justice, and peace, with wisdom, total dedication, and extraordinary practicality: first in his diocese, then in prison, and finally on a global scale.

Released from prison in 1988 and living in Rome since 1991, Van Thuan was unable to return to his homeland and remained without a defined role for several years. Yet it was precisely during those years that he did impressive work to support Vietnamese refugees across the globe, both on a human and a spiritual level, promoting an international aid network and a wide range of initiatives. We still have his handwritten requests for help, as he had neither resources nor support. One request is for the *Lazarus Project – Friends of the Lepers in Vietnam*. Van Thuận begins: “Out of love for my leper friends, I offer these pages for your reading.”

His major contribution on a global scale is his role in the genesis of the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (2004). In the run-up to the Jubilee of 2000, the continental Synods of Bishops produced a comprehensive map of the contemporary world, revealing the poverty and wealth of various countries. This kindled, in the heart of Pope John Paul II, a yearning to ensure a globalisation rooted in solidarity, leaving no one on the margins.³ To this effect, in March 1999, John Paul II wrote a letter to Van Thuan calling for the drafting of a *Catechism of Catholic Social Teaching*. The Pontiff insisted that what is needed is not an exhaustive treatise but a compendium that is comprehensible to all, leaving it up to the local Churches to analyse their own context and help bring about what today we call integral human development.⁴

With various experts, Van Thuận immediately launched a series of seminars in various parts of the world, that is, a process of dialogue with the different geographical areas, rather than drafting a document behind closed doors.

One such seminar was held in Ghana in June 1999. Van Thuận spoke of the coming Third Millennium as the “era of the Church’s Social Teaching.” He concluded with a poignant question: “Faced with the present political and economic situation, there are those who wonder: ‘Will we be able to cross the threshold of the new millennium with hope?’” In response, Van Thuận quoted a well-known journalist who, referring to the global economy, foresaw ‘three catastrophic phases’ for impoverished societies: *exploitation – exclusion – elimination*. “My heart is torn,” Van Thuận said in reply, “when I think of all that, I want to cry out: ‘Impossible!’”⁵

The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* aimed to respond to this cry. The drafting proceeded rapidly, but Van Thuận’s health deteriorated and he could not see it through to completion. When the *Compendium* was published, the new President of the

³ Cf. John Paul II, Message for the World Day of Peace, 1998.

⁴ Cf. F.-X. Nguyen Van Thuận, *El catecismo social de la Iglesia*, Santafé de Bogotá, 20 julio 2000.

⁵ F.-X. Nguyen Van Thuận, *The New Millennium. Era of the Church’s Social Teaching*, Seminar on the Social Teaching of the Church, Ghana, 26-30 June 1999.

Pontifical Council, Cardinal Renato Raffaele Martino, recalled how his predecessor had “guided the complex preparatory phase of this document with wisdom, constancy and foresight.” The *Compendium*, noted Martino, “therefore bears the seal of a great witness to the Cross.”

To this day, Cardinal François Xavier Nguyen Van Thuận continues to witness powerfully. Hope, his life reminds us, does not flow from external circumstances, but from following Jesus Christ. The venerable Cardinal shows the way: firm faith, infectious hope, and a love that sincerely forgives.