



Memories of a friendship

You were excellent

Cardinal Luis Antonio Gokim Tagle

It gives me great joy to be part of this event that celebrates Cardinal François-Xavier Nguyễn Văn Thuận. I thank his family, especially his sister Elisabeth, and the institutions that have brought us together today to declare to the world that hope is real and that we have seen it in the person of Cardinal Van Thuan. My role is not to deliver an academic discourse but to tell a story.

Let us go back to Manila in the Philippines, when it was the center of the world's attention in January 1995. It was the tenth World Youth Day, taking place for the first time in Asia. Pope John Paul II interacted with millions of young people in Manila. During those days, the 6th plenary assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences or FABC convened in Manila to mark the 25th anniversary of its foundation also in Manila in 1970 during the visit of Pope Paul VI.

In 1995, although I was still a young priest, I was assigned, not to the World Youth Day but to the sessions of the Asian Bishops. The central committee of the FABC asked me to deliver a keynote reflection on the topic "Jesus Christ: His Service to Life". On January 11, 1995, I came prepared to give the talk but when I stood before the Bishops of Asia, I regretted having accepted the invitation. Shaking like a nervous wreck, I read my paper hurriedly, and upon concluding, I rushed out of the auditorium, went to the dining room, prepared a big cup of coffee and wished that no one would see me. As I was sipping the coffee, a Bishop approached me. I should have gone to my room, not to the dining room, but it was too late. "You looked nervous during your conference," the Bishop said, "but you did very well. You were excellent." I thanked him, with my shaking body starting to relax. Extending his hand to me, the Bishop said, "I am Archbishop Francis-Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan from Vietnam, now serving in the Vatican." I felt like lightning just hit me. This is the Van Thuan I have heard about. Now he is standing in front of me, consoling me, assuring me, affirming me. After thanking

him for his kind words, I asked about his life that had become quite famous. We sat down, he recounted his story. It was afternoon. It struck me that as he recalled painful and even humiliating experiences, his voice remained calm, his face serene. There was not a trace of bitterness and hatred in him. I could not get my eyes off of his radiant and smiling face. Then it was evening. We missed dinner. But before going our separate ways, he said, "From now on call me 'Uncle'. If you travel to Rome, make sure you come and see me." I promised to do so, but in my heart I doubted whether I would go to Rome. One thing I am sure of was that Archbishop Thuan missed his family. "Call me Uncle." Maybe I looked like one of his nephews.

Two years later in 1997 Pope John II named me a member of the International Theological Commission, headed by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. Starting in 1998 I would come to Rome at least twice a year for meetings. Every time I was in Rome I telephoned Uncle Thuan, the President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. My Uncle is now President! When his schedule allowed it, he invited me to dinner in different restaurants. He ordered food but never ate. He just watched me eat. He enjoyed putting food on my plate. But sometimes I worried why he seldom ate. In 1999 or 2000 he gave me money to buy his book *Five Loaves and Two Fish* for the seminarians of the seminary where I was rector. He said if I could not find copies in the Philippines, I should use the money to have the book printed. In February 2001, I rejoiced that Uncle Thuan was named a Cardinal by Pope John Paul II. Then in October 2001 Pope John Paul II appointed me Bishop of Imus. I invited Uncle Thuan to my episcopal ordination in December but he excused himself due to his health problems. He promised to pray for me. We joked that the Cardinal now has a bishop nephew. I promised to visit him during the formation course for newly appointed Bishops in 2002.

I came to Rome in September 2002 to join the bishops appointed the year before in the annual formation course. On September 15, 2002 I telephoned his residence. I was informed that Uncle Cardinal was seriously ill. He had stomach cancer. Now I know why he seldom ate. He must have been in pain when he brought me to restaurants. But his suffering did not prevent him from making others happy. The following day, September 16, he passed on to the God of Glory in whom he had always put his hope. I came to the funeral Mass on September 20, 2002 at Saint Peter's Basilica, in the presence of Pope John Paul II. The choir of Vietnamese seminarians, priests, and sisters filled the Basilica with melodious prayer. We were back in his beloved Vietnam. Sadness was palpable in the air, but also gratitude for the gift of this servant of God and the Church. As I walked towards the door, I stopped and touched his coffin and whispered, "Uncle, I am here. You did very well. You were excellent." With all of you, I am of the sure hope that Uncle Thuan now lives in the eternal justice and peace of God.