



The Holy See

FUNERAL MASS FOR CARDINAL FRANÇOIS-XAVIER NGUYỄN VAN THUÂN

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

Friday 20 September 2002

1. *"Their hope is full of immortality"* (Wis 3,4).

These consoling words from the Book of Wisdom invite us, *in the light of hope*, to offer our prayers of suffrage for the elect soul of the late Cardinal François-Xavier Nguyễn Van Thuân, who lived his whole life under the banner of hope.

Certainly, his death saddens all who knew and loved him: his relatives, especially his mother, to whom I renew my expression of affectionate closeness. I think of the beloved Church in Vietnam, who generated him to the faith; and I also think of all the Vietnamese people, whom the venerable Cardinal expressly remembered in his spiritual testament, saying that he had always loved them. The Holy See mourns Cardinal Van Thuân; he spent his last years in its service, as Vice President and then President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace.

Even at this moment, with great affection he seems to address to everyone, *the invitation to hope*. When I asked him to give the meditations for the Spiritual Exercises of the Roman Curia in the year 2000, he chose as his theme: "Testimony of Hope". Now that the Lord has tested him, as "gold in the crucible", and has accepted him "as a sacrificial burnt offering", 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.

2. *Hope in God!* With this invitation to trust in the Lord the beloved Cardinal began the meditations of the Spiritual Retreat. His exhortations have remained impressed upon my mind, for the depth of his reflections, enriched with continuous personal memories; most of them were related to the 13 years he spent in prison. He told us that precisely in prison he understood that the foundation of

the Christian life is "*choosing God alone*", totally abandoning oneself into His fatherly hands.

He added in the light of his personal experience, we are called to proclaim the "Gospel of hope" to everyone; and, he specified, only with the radicalness of our sacrifice can we bring this vocation to its full realization, even in the midst of the harshest trials. "To treasure each suffering", he said, "as one of the countless faces of Jesus crucified, and to unite our suffering to his, means to enter into his own dynamic of suffering-love. It means to participate in his light, his strength, his peace, it means to rediscover within us a new and abundant present of God" (*Testimony of Hope*, Rome 2001, pp. 93-94).

3. We might wonder where he found the patience and courage that have always distinguished him. On this subject, he confided that his priestly vocation was mysteriously but truly bound *to the blood of the martyrs* who died in the last century while they were preaching the Gospel in Vietnam. "The martyrs", he noted, "taught us to say *yes* - a yes without conditions and limits to the love of the Lord. But the martyrs also taught us to say *no* - no to flattery, to compromise, to injustice - even with the intent of saving one's own life" (*ibid.*, p. 107). He added that it was not a question of heroism, but of fidelity, developed by looking at Jesus, the model of every witness and martyr. It was a heritage to be accepted every day in a life full of love and gentleness.

4. In offering our last farewell to this *heroic herald of Christ's Gospel*, let us thank the Lord for giving us, in him, a shining example of Christian loyalty to the point of martyrdom. He said of himself with striking simplicity: "In the abyss of my sufferings ... I never shut anyone out of my heart" (*ibid.*, p. 94).

His secret was indomitable trust in God, nourished by prayer and suffering, accepted with love. In prison he celebrated the Eucharist every day with three drops of wine and a drop of water in the palm of his hand. This was his altar, his cathedral. The Body of Christ was his "medicine". He recounted with great feeling: Each time I celebrated Mass, I had the opportunity to extend my hands and nail myself to the cross with Jesus, to drink with him the bitter chalice. Each day in reciting the words of consecration, I confirmed with all my heart and soul a new pact, an eternal pact between Jesus and me through his blood mixed with mine" (*ibid.*, p. 131).

5. "*For me to live is Christ*" (Phil 1,21). Faithful unto death, Cardinal Nguyễn Văn Thuận made his own the Apostle Paul's words we have just heard. He preserved serenity and even joy, during his long and painful stay in the hospital. During the last days, when he could no longer speak, he fixed his gaze on the Crucifix before him. He prayed in silence while he consummated his last sacrifice, crowning a life marked by *heroic configuration with Christ on the Cross*. Very applicable to him are the words Jesus proclaimed in the immediate view of his Passion: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies it bears much fruit (Jn 12,24), aptly apply to him.

Only with the sacrifice of himself does the Christian contribute to the salvation of the world. It was so for our venerable Brother Cardinal. He leaves us, but his example remains. Faith assures us that he is not dead but has entered into the eternal day which knows no sunset.

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