

***THE FUNDAMENTAL ELEMENTS OF CARDINAL VAN  
THUÂN'S SPIRITUALITY IN THE PASTORAL LETTER***

July 5, 2013

Bernard Cardinal Law

My task is to comment on the six Pastoral Letters of Cardinal Van Thuân written between 1968 and 1978 when he was Bishop of Nha Trang. Specifically, I have been asked to comment upon the spirituality which they contain and convey. I will, I hope, be excused for focusing my attention on the first of these letters, and will, at the end, explain why.

First, let me express my gratitude for the invitation to participate in this special occasion which celebrates the extraordinary Christian witness of this Servant of God, Cardinal Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuân. I come to this task with the cherished memories of friendship which extends from the end of his incarceration until his final illness.

We are all indebted to the Pontifical Council of Justice and Peace, to Cardinal Turkson and before him Cardinal Martino, as well as to the Vicar of Rome, Cardinal Vallini and his associates who have so effectively followed this Diocesan Process. I express my personal indebtedness to Dott.ssa Luisa Melo, and my joy at being once again with the members of Cardinal Van Thuân's family.

The volume in which these six Pastoral Letters have been made available is a helpful and excellent resource for those who wish to appreciate more fully the life and work of Cardinal Van Thuân. Particularly helpful are the chronology of the life of the Servant of God,

the introduction to each of the letters, and the essays of Cardinal Turkson and Bishop Toso.

It is important to situate these Pastoral Letters in the personal context of Cardinal Van Thuân's life as well as the contexts of Vietnam, of the world, and of the Church.

In 1967, at the age of 39, Father Francis Xavier Van Thuân was ordained a bishop as Ordinary of the Diocese of Nha Trang. He came to the fullness of the priesthood with the experience of graduate studies in Rome in the field of Canon Law, with pastoral teaching experience in Vietnam as well as Germany.

As a young man, he suffered from tuberculosis. This serious health problem, however, seems not to have deterred him from sustaining an active life.

It is important to bear in mind that this young and talented Bishop whose gifts were recognized by the Church was undoubtedly known as well by the broader Vietnamese society. His family which included the President of Vietnam was a factor which obviously would cause concern to some. Those in leadership in the revolutionary government of the North would have had cause to view carefully this young Bishop.

He wrote his first pastoral letter in a year, 1968, which in retrospect is recognized as marking a profound and negative global cultural shift. Traditional and fundamental cultural moorings began to give way to the strong currents of unbridled self-expression and choice.

The Church at that time was basking in the afterglow of the Second Vatican Council. There was in many places a feeling of euphoria. Some, including Pope Benedict XVI, have spoken of a hermeneutic of discontinuity concerning the way that certain interpreters approached the Second Vatican Council. This outlook was prevalent in the thought of

many both at the time of the Council and continues to some extent even until today.

Pope Paul VI inaugurated a Year of Faith in June, 1967, which was to extend until 29 December 1968. The first Pastoral Letter of the young Bishop Van Thuân was dated 11 October 1968. He would have benefited therefore from the Holy Father's initiative for the Year of Faith, and he would have felt the strong and challenging cultural currents of 1968. To cite the newly published volume of his Pastoral Letters: "In a situation of great peril for Peace and Christian faith, the powerful invitation of the letter is to watch and pray: "To be vigilant in order to see and to act with intelligence and strength, and to receive God's help to be saved."

This first letter in its title, *Watch and Pray*, points to a constant in the spiritual life of Cardinal Van Thuân. He was a person uncommonly aware of all that surrounded him. His legendary skill in mimicking the footsteps of individuals and his skill in imitating voices was honed in years of solitary confinement. He was equally aware of the movements of the heart, the challenges of a society in turmoil and the absolute necessity to pray for God's guidance and providential intervention. It is moving to read these words again of the young Bishop written in 1968:

All of you can see the sorrowful situation of Vietnamese society today: moral decay, crisis of the economy, gambling, criminality, fornication, theft, exploitation. All of these are sources of an ever greater corruption of society. Exploitation has become a profession, lying is a theory, terror a method... Only Catholic faith will help us to overcome the temptation to seek riches, easy comforts... Having faith and, above all, the grace of God. Moreover we must know the Catechism, listen to the Sunday preaching and be dedicated to study (*fides ex auditu*).

It is very interesting to hear these words in the light of the response given to Pope John Paul II by the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops of 1985. When the Pope asked what could be done to assist the Church in better internalizing the documents of the Second Vatican Council, they

recommended the presentation of a new Catechism to assist the faithful in addressing more effectively the challenges facing the contemporary Church.

With a clear vision of the reality of his day, Bishop Van Thuân wrote: “We are members of the Church. Never like today, The Church has known moments glorious and powerful. At the same time, never before, She had fight terrible spiritual battles as today. God needs our collaboration and we need His help, for, "without Him we cannot to anything" (cf Jn. 15,4).”

In this first Pastoral Letter, the fundamental elements of Cardinal Van Thuân’s spirituality are clearly set forth:

- The primacy of faith;
- A vivid sense of the mystery of the Church as the Body of Christ;
- An unflinching hope in the face of challenges and evils which confront the believer;
- A constant reliance on the power of prayer.

Citing various crises overcome by prayer in the history of salvation, the Bishop points to the battle of Lepanto on 7 October 1571 when, in the words of this first letter, “the Muslim fleet loose the battle.” It was the intention of the Sultan “to attack Rome have the symbol of Islam replace the Cross on the tomb of Peter.” The Dominican Pope of the time asked the faithful of Rome to implore, through the intercession of the Virgin Mary, that God save Rome and Europe in this hour of great peril. The battle was won, the threat to Rome was averted, and, as Bishop Van Thuân says, “ The Pope decided to create the feast of the Rosary on Oct. 7, and the litanies to the Virgin he added "Mary, help of Christians."”

This reference and others in this first Pastoral Letter which points to the importance of Marian devotion illustrates an integral dimension of Cardinal Van Thuân's spirituality, a dimension which was evident until the end of his life.

The first Pastoral Letter written barely seven months after his arrival as Bishop constitutes in a very real sense a portrait of the spirituality of Cardinal Van Thuân which his consequent life experiences were to hone. Perhaps more clearly than any other of his words he gives us a window into the soul when he writes:

“What I wish to underline is that prayer and life cannot be separated. Not to pray means to eliminate God from reality of life. We may think the life and prayer seldom agree. What a mistake! The reason for this mistake lies in our conception of prayer. We think that in order to pray we ought to forget everything: work, neighbor, our human condition; while to live means being always in a hurry, acting all the time – yet, Jesus clearly thought us: "Not those who say Lord, Lord, will enter the Kingdom of heaven, but those who do the will of my Father" (Matt. 7,21).”

Consonant with this beautiful definition of prayer, I would suggest that the most moving prayer is the Crucifixion.

And with that evocative allusion to the simple cross of prison wire and nails which has become emblematic of Cardinal Van Thuân's thirteen years of imprisonment, I hope that these thoughts drawn from the first of his Pastoral Letters may be of help in tracing the spirituality expressed in the other five letters.

Let me end with the moving words of Blessed John Paul II spoken at the funeral Mass of Cardinal Van Thuân on 20 September 2002:

“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."

The Holy Father concluded: "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."