

DIOCESAN TRIBUNAL OF THE VICARIATE OF ROME

Opening Session

of the Process of Beatification and Canonization of the
Servant of God card. Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuân

Your Eminences, Venerable Brothers in the episcopate, Distinguished Authorities, Brothers and Sisters.

1. We read in the Gospel of John (12:24): *“If the grain of wheat, fallen into the earth, does not die, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”* Jesus is speaking about himself, of the mystery of pain, solitude, and abandonment, and of his approaching death. He knows that, by abandoning himself, annihilated and humiliated, in the hands of the Father, death becomes the source of life, just as the seed in the soil disintegrates so that the plant can be born.

When talking about the grain of wheat, Jesus wanted remind the disciples of what he had already announced to them several times: that is, following the Master requires that they renounce themselves, take up their cross each day and go behind him. This is the way to save one's life (cf. *Mk* 8:35–36) in the evangelical perspective of the new commandment: “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends” (*Jn* 15:13).

This reference to the Gospel is, in my view, the key to interpreting the life of the Servant of God, Card. Nguyễn Van Thuân, who's Cause of Beatification and Canonization we are opening with this public session.

2. Francis Xavier Nguyễn Van Thuân was born on April 17th 1928 in Huê, the capital of imperial Vietnam. He descended from a family of martyrs. His ancestors were victims of many persecutions, between 1644 and 1888. His paternal great-grandfather recounted that, when he was 15 years old, he used to walk 30 kilometers each day to bring to a little rice and salt to his Father, imprisoned for being Christian. His grandmother, who could not read or write, recited the rosary for priests together with the family every evening. His mother Elisabeth gave him a Christian education, taught the stories of the Bible and told to him about the family's martyrs, at the same instilling in him the love for the fatherland. Francis Xavier never forgot how the family had suffered for the faith and this precious heritage fortified him, thus preparing him to face his future “Calvary,” as a dear heritage. Formed to a solid spiritual life, he began to see the hand of God's Providence in all things and to entrust docilely entrust his life to the work of the Holy Spirit. The Servant of God soon felt called to the priesthood, thanks to the education received

from his family and the encouragement of his uncle, Father Ngo Dinh Thuc, who later became one of Vietnam's first Bishops.

In August 1941, he entered the Minor Seminary in Ninh, where he lived with joy and commitment the first stages of training for the priesthood. He had the good fortune of having excellent and pious teachers, who strengthened his decision. Among them stand out the figures of the Rector, Father Jean-Baptiste Urrutia, of the Society of Foreign Missions of Paris, and future Apostolic Vicar of Huê, with whom the young Thuân always remained close, and Father Jean-Marie Cressonier, who strengthened his devotion to Our Lady through the spirituality of Irish Benedictine Columba Marmion, and prepared him for the future hardships in prison through the witness of the beauty of life in poverty.

From that time on he chose as models for his life three saints: St. Theresa of Lisieux, whom he already knew in his childhood thanks to his mother, and from whom he learned the little way of spiritual childhood and to put his confidence in prayer; Saint John Vianney, who taught him the virtues of humility and patience and the value of tenacious effort; and Saint Francis Xavier, the great Apostle of Asia, from whom he learned indifference in the face of success or failure.

The years in the Minor Seminary (1941-1947) were those of the Second World War, the arrival of communism in Vietnam, the family's flight from the city of Huê, and the execution by the Communists of uncle Khoi and of his cousin Huan for treason against the country. The young Thuân suffered greatly, and was assailed by anger for the injustice suffered by his family that had always faithfully served the country. Yet, he understood we cannot follow Christ without forgiving our enemies. In this difficult inner struggle, he was helped by the courageous witness of the Mexican Jesuit priest, whose life he had read, Father Miguel Agustin Pro (1891-1927); when he was arrested by the Mexican secret police, he said, that he "feared nothing, because he had placed his life in the hands of God once and for all." Thuân understood that he would have had to do the same, and so he slowly faced the misfortune, regained courage, while trying to alleviate the atrocious pain.

From 1947 to 1953, he studied in the Major Seminary of Phu Xuan. During those years he also reflected on the idea of entering religious life: he thought of joining the Jesuits, fascinated by the figure of St. Francis Xavier, his patron, and Father Pro; he even considered the possibility to become a Benedictine because of his attraction to the contemplative life; but in the end he opted for the diocesan priesthood, for which he prepared himself with great commitment and seriousness.

3. He was ordained a priest on June 11th 1953 by Bishop Urrutia, his former Rector. His joy at celebrating Holy Mass was immense, to the point that he was not able to hold back his tears. His first pastoral assignment was the parish of Quang

Binh, about 160 kilometers from Huê; but he could not remain for more than a few weeks because of a serious form of tuberculosis. He had to face a period of trials, going from one hospital to another, while awaiting surgery on his right lung. At the moment of going into surgery, a final radiography was made; it showed that the disease had disappeared and his lungs were clean. The surgeon of the military hospital, Dr. Grall, said to him, "It's incredible; we can't find a trace of tuberculosis in either of your lungs... you are now in good health and I can't explain why." Don Thuân thanked God and the Blessed Virgin for what had happened in his body and he made the decision to always do God's will.

After a time of convalescence and a short period during which he had small ministries, Bishop Urrutia sent him to Rome to complete his studies. He attended the Urbaniana University, where he earned his doctorate in canon law in 1959, with a thesis on the organization of the military chaplains in the world. From that time, he always recalled his love for Christian Rome and its wonderful works of art, but also the pilgrimages to the Marian shrines of Lourdes and Fatima, where he was able to internalize the message of the Virgin's apparitions. The words that Our Lady addressed to Bernadette in Lourdes during their third meeting, on February 18th 1858: "I do not promise to make you happy in this world but in the other," resonated in his soul, and the young priest treasured them in his heart, as he prepared himself to accept the tribulations and suffering that the Lord would send. After returning to Vietnam, he exercised the ministry of teacher and then became the Chancellor of the Huê's minor seminary, at a time of great social and political difficulties for his country and for his family. In fact, the Servant of God belonged to a family that was politically important in Vietnam. His uncle Ngo Dimh Diem was President of the country until the military coup on November 1st 1963, after which he was killed. He suffered unspeakable pain and faced this new test comforted by his faith and especially by his mother's words to him: "Your uncle dedicated his life to his country and it is not extraordinary that he died for it. As monk [he was indeed a Benedictine Oblate and had professed in 1954 in the monastery of St. Andrew of Bruges, Belgium], he dedicated his life to God and there is nothing extraordinary that he died when God called him."

In the meantime, the Archdiocese of Huê did not have a pastor; so, the presbyteral council called Don Francis Xavier to hold the office of Vicar Capitular.

4. After four years, on April 13, 1967, he was then 39 years old, Msgr. Francis Xavier was appointed Bishop of Nha Trang. When his mother learned the news, she said, "A priest is a priest. The Church has honored you with a more important mission, but as a person, you are not changed. You are still a priest and that is the most important thing to remember." He received the episcopal consecration on the following June 24. In Nha Trang he deployed an intense pastoral ministry, with

special attention to the pastoral care of vocations and the training of future priests. In eight years, the number seminarians in the major seminary went from 42 to 147 and those in the minor seminary from 200 to 500. He also devoted much of his energies to the formation of lay people.

Less than a year after his election to the episcopate, the Communists launched an offensive to conquer certain cities in the South Vietnam, including Nha Trang. The apostolate of the young Bishop however continued without limitations; indeed, he worked generously both at the regional and universal levels. He was a member of the commission charged with creating the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, and in 1971 was appointed Consulter of the Dicastery of the Holy See, which would later become the Pontifical Council for the Laity. In his country, he was also charged with the office of President of the COREV, the committee for the reconstruction of Vietnam, an organization of the Pontifical Council Cor Unum that had the task of helping the more than four million people displaced by the war.

5. Eight years later, in April 1975, when South Vietnam was invaded entirely by the communist troops, Pope Paul VI appointed him Coadjutor Archbishop of Saigon (Thành-Phô Chi Minh, Hôchiminh Ville) with the right of succeeding Archbishop Nguyễn Van Binh. This appointment was to have terrible consequences.

Just a few weeks after the beginning of his pastoral service in Saigon, he was arrested on the false accusation of "conspiracy" operated by the Vatican and the Imperialists. This happened in the early afternoon of August 15th 1975, the Solemnity of the Our Lady's Assumption. The Archbishop only had his cassock and a rosary with him. He interpreted this terrible test in the light of faith, trying to fill his life as prisoner with love.

His first detention was in Nha Trang, his former diocese, where he remained under house arrest in the parish of Cay Vong. This familiar place raised his morale, inviting him to start a spiritual journey of interior purification and of complete self-surrender that was to last 13 years, including nine years in isolation.

In this new condition, he did not remain inactive. Already in the following month of October, he began to write a series of messages to the Christian community. A seven-year-old boy, named Quang, secretly brought him bits of paper, taken from old calendars, which then took back home so that his brothers and sisters could copy the Bishop's messages and circulate them. The book entitled *The Road to Hope* was born of the collection of these messages.

6. The imprisonment in Nha Trang lasted seven months; then he was transferred to the camp in Phu Khanh and locked up in a small cell without windows. He remained there for another nine months, under the custody of cruel men who mistreated him at every opportunity. They had no respect for him and apparently

took pleasure in humiliating him. And as if that wasn't enough, he was soon put into the harsh prison, in complete isolation, where he had no contact even with the jailers. A biographer writes: "All he saw, day and night, were the four walls of this dirty and humid cell a light bulb hanging from the ceiling at the end of an electric wire diffused a feeble yellowish light in this miserable place that surrounded the archbishop. Thuân slept on a hard surface covered by a straw mattress ..., but because of the extreme humidity, the mattress was covered with mildew... Gradually isolation began to produce the effect that torturers desired. Thuân began to be terrorized by the emptiness and the silence that reigned around him for countless days. Deprived of any sign of close human presence, he longed to hear sounds ... The jailers also used darkness to torment him. Without notice or reason, the faint light bulb in the cell was turned off, sometimes for days, and Thuân did not know when it was day or night... He no longer seemed to exist in the world of the living. The guard that brought him his meals no longer spoke: ... Only a hand... it withdrew the empty plate under the door and replaced with a full one" (Nguyễn Văn Châu, *Il miracolo della speranza*, ed. S. Paolo, 2004, pp. 226-227). One also can imagine, in this situation, the serious physical suffering due to the consequences of natural needs. The cell —continues the biographer— "was as hot as a furnace and because of the nearby latrine a nauseating stench filled the cell in the summer heat. Suffocating because of the humidity and lack of air, Thuân stretched himself out on the dirt floor, with his face close to the opening under the door to try to breathe a little air... it was almost impossible to move in the tiny cell, but Thuân realized that if he did not try to walk he would never survive. Thus began to make some steps forward and backwards, until the stifling summer heat made him sweat so much that the clothes stuck to his skin. After only few minutes, he was forced to lie on the floor again and to put the face near opening under the door to try to breathe" (p. 228). His strong memory also began to waver, so that he could not remember even the prayers. He was on the brink of insanity. "He no longer felt hunger or the need to sleep. He often vomited and continuously suffered from dizziness, and his entire body hurt... more and more his mind became empty for long periods of time" (p. 228).

The Communist officials regularly came to question him and tried to force him into signing a declaration stating that he had plotted with the Vatican and the Imperialists against the Communist revolution. In the face of his continuous refusal, they obsessively disparaged him. In this terrible situation, the Servant of God understood that he could offer all the pain and suffering to God as signs of his love. So, gradually, the cell was transformed into place for living, the pain ceded to joy and suffering became the source of hope.

On November 29th 1976, the Monday following the first Sunday of Advent, together with other prisoners he was put into chains, and taken to another place, 15

km from Saigon, and two days later, put on a ship with 1500 prisoners, for whom he immediately became the Good Samaritan, comforting them in their despair. After ten days of navigation, they came to the prison camp Vinh Quang, in the mountains of Vinh Dao, in North Vietnam. He was assigned to agricultural work and, on rainy days, he worked as an apprentice carpenter. The situation in this prison was less cruel than in the previous one, so much that it was possible to send him a bottle of wine labeled: “medicine against stomachaches”. So, he was able to begin celebrating Mass. The Eucharist became the central moment of his days, from whence he drew the strength to fortify his faith and that filled him with joy. He celebrated Mass in the palm of his hand, with three drops of wine and a drop of water. At that time, taking advantage of the tolerance of the guard, he also made a small cross that he always jealously guarded.

Two months later, he was again moved to another prison camp at the periphery of Hanoi, where he was obliged to share a cell with a colonel of the National Liberation Front for South Vietnam. This man was a spy who was supposed to report everything that Thuân did and said. However, slowly this cell companion became his friend, to the point where he told him to be very cautious. The guards too had a more benevolent attitude towards him. One of them, at the request of the Servant of God, gave him a piece of steel wire —although he at first feared that he wanted to use it to commit suicide— and a small pair of tongs to make the chain for his pectoral cross.

After 15 months in this camp, thanks also to international pressure in his favor, on May 13, 1978, he was brought to a village 20 kilometers from Hanoi, Giang Xa, where he was put under house arrest at the parish rectory, supervised day and night by a guard, with the permission to move and walk, but on the condition that he would not communicate with the people; the latter had also been properly instructed to avoid him. Msgr. Thuân gradually became more daring and began to exercise some pastoral activity. The guard, who sided with him, allowed the faithful to visit him, sometimes in small groups. All this made the authorities suspicious, and they decided to isolate him once again in a cell. So in the early hours of November 5th 1982 a government van drove him to a military area, where he lived in an apartment with a police officer and under the surveillance of two guards. For six years, he always lived isolated in a room, of which he regularly changed the structure. However, Msgr. Thuân no longer feared isolation, because he was now completely abandoned to God. He celebrated Mass every day, at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, and followed it with time of prayer to meditate Jesus' agony and death on the Cross. His goodness gradually conquered his jailers and this infuriated the higher authorities. For this reason, he was transferred again to a maximum-security prison and put into isolation. The day of liberation dawned in 1988, on November 21st, the Feast of the presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Thirteen years had passed.

7. The most significant events in the life of Msgr. Thuân after his release may be summarized as follows: In 1992, he was appointed member of the International Catholic Migration Commission, in Geneva; in November 1994 was called to hold the office of Vice President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, of which he became president four years later, on 24 June 1998.

As is well known, in Lent of the Holy Year of 2000, he preached the spiritual retreat to the Holy Father John Paul II and to the Roman Curia¹. At the conclusion of this retreat, the Pope said: “I thank the very dear Msgr. Francis Xavier Nguyễn Van Thuân for the simplicity and spiritual inspiration with which he has guided us in the deepening of our vocation as witnesses to the Gospel of hope at the beginning of the Third Millennium. He was a witness of the Cross throughout the long years of imprisonment in Vietnam, and he often told us about certain facts and episodes of his painful detention, thus he has confirmed us in the very consoling certainty that when everything collapses around us and perhaps even within us, Christ remains our unfailing support.”

One year after his creation as Cardinal, he peacefully died on 16 September 2002.

8. The recollection, albeit very brief, of the life of this great witness of faith inspires great admiration. I asked myself: What was the secret that allowed Card. Nguyễn Van Thuân to face such tremendous trials? From whence did he draw the inner strength to overcome hardship and humiliation? And what are the essential features of his nature as Pastor?

Reading his biography persuaded me that an important part in his spiritual journey is due to the education and the testimony received through his family, in particular from his mother. In the darkest hours of captivity, the Servant of God constantly returned to the teachings received, and to the example of his loved ones who never retreated in the face of threats, and confronted suffering with Christian fortitude.

I also believe that he succeeded in overcoming despondency and mental anguish, which more than once were close to throwing him into despair, because he strongly clung to the Word of God and the Eucharist, which was the school in which he formed his life day after day.

¹ John Paul II, on December 15th 1999, during the audience with him, said, “In the first year of the third millennium, a Vietnamese will preach the Spiritual Exercises of the Roman Curia”. Then looking at him intensely the Pope asked: “Do you have a theme?” “Holy Father, I’ve fallen from the clouds, I am surprised. Perhaps I could speak of hope,” replied the Servant of God. And the Pope: “Give your witness!” The Spiritual Exercises began on March 12th, in the *Redemptoris Mater* Chapel, in the Vatican, and ended on the following March 18.

In prison, he could not have the Bible. So, he resourcefully collected the pieces of paper that were to compose a tiny diary in which he inscribed more than 300 Gospel verses. This unique text was the daily spiritual Viaticum, from which he drew light and strength. And as to the Eucharist, we know that to reserve the Blessed Sacrament he even used the paper of cigarette packages.

Finally, his attachment to the See of Peter and the episcopal communion to which he remained always united were a great support. In Hanoi, during the time of the hard prison, a policewoman brought him a small fish that he should cook. It was wrapped in two pages of the *Osservatore Romano*. Msgr. Van Thuân received them almost like a relic. Without being noticed, he washed them, dried them in the sun and then jealously conserved them. In the terrible isolation of the prison, those two pages of the newspaper of the Holy See were the tangible sign through which he expressed the bond of loyalty to the Holy Father.

9. The Servant of God was endowed with an extraordinary intelligence, and he spoke and wrote with great ease. However, he was not, strictly speaking, an intellectual, nor a writer. His vocation was that of a shepherd of souls. The obliged inactivity—as I have said—led him to write in order to continue nourishing his flock. Although prevented from exercising his Ministry, his apostolic zeal made him try every possible initiative to proclaim the Gospel. For example, in prison, he succeeded in creating small Christian communities that had gathered to pray and especially to celebrate the Eucharist; and, at night, when it was possible, he organized shifts of adoration before the Blessed Sacrament. Then, after being freed, his intense pastoral activity, compatible with the work at the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, led him to continue his publications, which were for the most part spiritual.

10. I cannot avoid recalling clearly another aspect of Card. Van Thuân's personality: his love for people that sprung from his shepherd's heart.

How many of those who approached him were struck by his goodness, starting with his captors, so much so that once, a police chief asked him to teach the languages that he spoke fluently to the agents, and so his jailers became his students.

This sort of amiability characterized his life. A biographer writes: "Mild and smiling, Cardinal Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuân always received visitors advancing towards them with outstretched arms as a sign of welcome... his expression was always cordial and reassuring. With him, people felt assured and at ease... he spoke slowly, choosing the words with absolute precision. His voice was soft and he spoke with eloquent simplicity. It was obvious that his simple ideas came from great inner depth; and, for those who listened to him, his words were an

invitation to reflect with examination of conscience... He knew he was capable of quickly giving apparently banal, normal, facts and things usually taken for granted a new meaning, so that they attracted the imagination and became stimulants for contemplation” (André Nguyen Van Chau, *Il miracolo della speranza*, ed. San Paolo, 2004, p. 7).

11. All things considered, Card. Van Thuân was primarily a witness of hope. He believed even when all hope seemed lost, precisely because of trials that the Lord had permitted. In his book *The Road of Hope*, speaking about Abraham, he wrote: “The whole life [of Abraham] was a succession of difficulties. And he blindly accomplished the commandments, sustained by his hope in God, ready to follow His voice in every time and place. ‘In hope he believed against hope’ (*Rom* 4:18), as ‘Father of all believers’ (*Rom* 4:11).” It is not exaggerated, then, to say that our Cardinal was a worthy disciple of Abraham, not only by imitating his steadfast hope, but also by transmitting and strengthening this virtue in so many people, through his example, preaching, and writings. His practice of the virtue of hope was firmly rooted in grace and not in fleeting earthly hopes; and he kept his gaze fixed beyond time, without letting himself be overcome by the apparent defeats of this life, and worked to improve the reality of this world.

12. In relation to his mission to instill hope, we should finally recall the commitment of the Servant of God to diffuse the Church’s Social Doctrine and his work in the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace.

He was convinced that one of the most urgent and necessary tasks in society today is to sow seeds of confidence in it, and to evaluate the social phenomena, including the negative ones, as trials conducive to growing humanly and supernaturally. In this perspective, as President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, the Cardinal promoted, in 1999, the publication of an authoritative synthesis of the Church’s teaching in the social field, the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, in order to show clearly the connection of the social doctrine with the new evangelization so intensely desired by the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II.

He wrote: “The real revolution, the one that will be able to transform everything, from the fathomless heart of man to political, economic and social structures, cannot be achieved without man not without God. It will be accomplished ‘through humans, in Christ and with Him’” (*The Road of Hope*, n. 623).

13. I remain personally convinced that Card. Francis Xavier Nguyễn Van Thuân had an extraordinary personality, in which the transforming power of grace found a human nature particularly apt and docile to be shaped and transformed by action of the Holy Spirit.

Those who had the joy of knowing and frequenting him, I believe, can agree that the Servant of God was a true disciple of Jesus, who made following Christ his sole reason for living, thus leading all things back to God and recognizing the Lord's providential hand of in every experience. In the terrible desolation of the years of captivity, he opened himself to the light, regenerating the breath of the Holy Spirit. God manifested Himself to him as the All, and this was enough to give a new perspective to the weight and the suffering cause by the denial of liberty and even of personal dignity. His extraordinary spiritual experience remains for us a precious heritage.

The grain of wheat that fell into the earth has borne fruit.

14. I entrust to the Judicial Vicar of the Diocesan Court, Msgr. Gianfranco Bella, and to the other Officials the onerous task of examining the life and the Christian virtues of this distinguished Pastor, with the hope that his life shall help bishops, priests and laypeople of our time to "in the path of living faith, which arouses hope and works through charity" (*Lumen Gentium*, 41).

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*Vicar General of His Holiness
for the Diocese of Rome*