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The spiritual and biographical roots of Cardinal Van Thuân's message of hope

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Introduction

In this Holy Year, which has the motto 'Pilgrims of Hope', we speak today of Cardinal Van Thuân as a 'witness of hope' in a world that is almost on the brink of collapse.

Hope was indeed the theme of his life. Not only when he became bishop in South Vietnam at the age of 39 and chose the title of a conciliar document as his motto - *Gaudium et Spes: Joy and Hope* - but also during the 13 years in which the communist regime held him in strict captivity after the fall of Saigon; and finally in the period that followed, when he worked for peace and justice on a global level as vice-president and then president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace.

But what does it mean to be a 'pilgrim of hope,' to live and act out of hope? Let us explore this question with the help of Cardinal Van Thuân.

Hope is the opposite of resignation, apathy, grey everyday life and pessimism. But it is not simply optimism that closes our eyes to the often harsh and tragic aspects of reality. Van Thuân had a very realistic perception of situations. Without indulging in illusions, he spoke in the last years of his life of entire peoples being threatened with exclusion, exploitation and extermination. Three 'E's: exclusion, exploitation, extermination.

For him, hope was the future that comes from God, specifically from Jesus the Crucified One, who appears to have been abandoned by God, seems to have died a miserable death, but is then surprisingly resurrected. This is the historical relevance of the Gospel and the explosive power of hope that he testified to with his life and with which he wants to speak to us today.

1. A brief biographical sketch

François-Xavier Nguyen Van Thuân was born on 17 April 1928 in Hue, Vietnam, the second of nine sons and daughters in a Catholic family whose ancestors included martyrs. One of his uncles, Ngô Đình Diệm, became the first president of South Vietnam in 1955, at a time of conflict in which he stood between the fronts until he was assassinated by traitors in 1963. Van Thuân's mother forgave the murderers,

and this had a lasting impact on him throughout his life. However, his relationship to the president contributed to him being viewed critically by all sides and treated particularly harshly during his imprisonment.

Even at a young age, Van Thuân was strongly attracted to the reality of faith. At the age of 13, he entered the seminary and was ordained a priest in 1953. He attributed his vocation in a special way to the witness of the martyrs. In 1956, his bishop sent him to Rome to study canon law. This is how he came to Germany for the first time in 1957 and was a guest at the mother house of the Cellitinnen - a connection that has continued ever since, not only before his imprisonment, but also after his release, until the last years of his life. It is no coincidence that it was here in December 2000 that the serious tumour disease was discovered that led to his death.

In 1967, Van Thuân was appointed bishop of Nha Trang. With youthful enthusiasm, he set about implementing the Second Vatican Council in the diocese, founding schools and social welfare organisations, devoting himself to spreading the Gospel and focusing in particular on the life and mission of the laity. He had always drawn on the great spiritual sources: Benedict, Ignatius of Loyola, Thérèse of Lisieux... At the same time, he was attentive to the new spiritual movements of our time. For example, he introduced the Cursillo movement to the diocese.

In 1973, purely by chance, he encountered the Focolare Movement during a flight. Van Thuân felt deeply moved by this charism, which has its cornerstones in the life of the Gospel, mutual love, the crucified and forsaken Christ, and the unity of all people. He realised that South Vietnam would probably soon be occupied by the communist North. This spirituality, he believed, could be a way forward for the time after that.

In 1974, he invited Focolare members from the Philippines to Vietnam and held three summer meetings with them, known as 'Mariapolis': two for anyone interested and one with 200 priests. He himself provided the translation.

Gradually, the Focolare became his spiritual home, which sustained him especially during his time in captivity. 'I must say in all honesty,' he recounted years later at a meeting of priests, 'that my encounter with Chiara Lubich and her charism of unity saved me during those long years.'

Seven days before the fall of Saigon in 1975, he was appointed as the future successor to the archbishop there. He had just taken up this ministry when, on 15 August, the Feast of the Assumption, he was arrested without warning. This was followed, as already mentioned, by 13 years of imprisonment, most of it in solitary confinement. All his far-sighted planning and action came to an end. But it was precisely this time that became a new and groundbreaking experience with God and the Gospel for Van Thuân.

In the Italian original of the book *Prayers of Hope*, he shares in the introduction what sustained him during these difficult years:

I am in solitary confinement in Thanh Liet prison, on the banks of the To Lich River, near Hanoi. One evening, while it is pouring with rain, an inner light dawns on me in bright rays and, in perfect simplicity, I realise that the radical decision for Jesus is the true and only happiness. To love everyone and everything in Jesus is blissful peace. Alone with myself, I exclaimed in my cell: 'Eureka! Eureka! I have found it! My God and my everything! My God, my mercy! Jesus loved me to the end, to the point of giving his life for me, for my sake. I want to live according to his testament (...): 'Mutual love, unity'.

The years in prison drag on until he is unexpectedly released on 21 November 1988, once again on a Marian feast day: the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Temple. However, he is unable to resume his episcopal office in Vietnam. In 1991, he is deported to Italy. He realises that he has no prospect of returning to Vietnam. So he became involved in helping Vietnamese refugees and also in the Vatican. In 1994, John Paul II appointed him vice-president and in 1998 president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (*Iustitia et Pax*). In this role, Van Thuân made a decisive contribution to the drafting of the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church.

Looking at the world situation, he is convinced that only living the Gospel can bring about change. That is why he spares no effort to bring the joyful message to bishops, priests and especially young people. Even during his imprisonment, he wrote down his insights and experiences with the Gospel, which are now being published as books.

In 2000, John Paul II invited him to give the annual retreat for the Pope and the Roman Curia. 'Do you already have a theme in mind?' he asked Van Thuân. And he replied, 'Yes, hope.' Many of his experiences are discussed in the 22 meditations. They are so inspiring that these meditations are already circulating around the world through a news agency during the retreat. Later, they are published as a book in more than a dozen languages: *Testimoni della speranza* in Italian, *Hoffnung, die trägt* in the German translation, published by Herder-Verlag.

In February 2001, Van Thuân was created cardinal by John Paul II. At that time, he was already suffering from a serious tumour. In the spring, he underwent surgery in the United States, which unfortunately was unsuccessful. A year later, a new attempt was made, this time in Milan. But after eight hours, the operation had to be abandoned unfinished. A few days earlier, I asked him: 'Aren't you afraid? Aren't you worried?' 'No,' he replied, 'because there are three possibilities: either I die during the operation, and that could be a good time, because I am prepared for it; or I survive and can work again; or I stay alive but can no longer work. All three possibilities are equally good.'

The months after the operation are difficult, not only physically, but also because he is plagued by deep doubts and inner darkness. During this time, he seems to me like Jesus in his abandonment by God. Little by little, his siblings and nieces and nephews come to visit him - from Canada and Australia - and he brings them all

into contact with the Focolare, because his work must continue. He expresses the wish to meet Chiara Lubich, the founder of the Focolare Movement, once again. But she is abroad. On 16 September 2002, she returns to Rome and goes straight from the airport to the hospital. 'A saint is dying here,' she says as she leaves the hospital room. An hour later, Van Thuân passes away.

At the funeral service in St. Peter's Basilica on 20 September 2002, John Paul II spoke of Van Thuân's heroic witness and remarked: 'Now the Lord has tested him "like gold in a crucible" and accepted him as a "perfect sacrifice", and we can truly say that "his hope was full of immortality" (cf. Wis 3:4, 6), that is, filled with Christ, who is the life and resurrection of all who trust in him.'

On 22 October 2010, the diocesan phase of the beatification process began in Rome and was completed on 5 July 2013. On 4 May 2017, Van Thuân was declared 'venerable' (Venerabile) by the Vatican Congregation for the Causes of Saints.

Personal reflection:

What particularly appealed to me about Cardinal Van Thuan?

Can I find three words to describe it?

2. Van Thuân's paths of hope

In the second part of this lecture, we will now explore the spiritual roots of Van Thuân's paths of hope. In doing so, I would like to let him speak for himself as much as possible.

A preliminary remark. His whole life is a path of hope. But *Paths of Hope* is also a book that came about in a very unusual way. When Van Thuân was under house arrest in the village of Cay-Vong, guarded by two policemen, he was tormented by the question: What can I do for my people?

One night, he says, a light dawned on him: "François, it's very simple. Do what Saint Paul did when he was in prison: he wrote letters to various communities."

*The next morning, I signalled to Quang, a seven-year-old boy who had returned from Mass at five o'clock in the morning when it was still dark, and asked him: 'Tell your mum to buy some old calendar pads for me.' Late in the evening, again in the dark, Quang brought me the calendars, and in October and November 1975, I wrote my message from captivity to my people every night. Every morning, the boy came to collect the pages and carry them home, where his brothers and sisters copied the message. This is how the book *The Way of Hope* came into being.*

In the following, I summarise Van Thuân's path of hope in three steps:

- Hope as a path with God alone
- Hope as a path to all without boundaries
- Hope as a transformation of everyday life

2.1. Hope as a path with God alone

The hope of the Gospel does not arise from what we do, nor from secure circumstances and predictable developments. In Van Thuân's experience, on the contrary, it arose precisely in despair. During the retreat in the Vatican, he recounted the following key experience:

During my long ordeal of nine years in solitary confinement, in a cell without windows, sometimes exposed to electric light for days on end, sometimes in darkness, I felt suffocated by the heat and humidity, and I was close to losing my mind. I was still a young bishop, with eight years of pastoral experience. I could not sleep. The thought of having to leave the diocese, of letting so many works I had begun go to ruin, tortured me. My whole being was shaken by rebellion.

One night, I heard a voice from the depths of my heart saying to me: "Why are you tormenting yourself like this? You must distinguish between God and the works of God. Everything you have begun and wish to continue (...) are works of God, but they are not God! If God wants you to let go of everything, then do so immediately and trust in him. (...)

This light, Van Thuân affirms, brought me a new inner peace that completely changed my way of thinking and helped me to endure moments that were physically unbearable. From that moment on, a new strength filled my heart, and it has accompanied me throughout all these 13 years.

In this way, God has become the centre of Van Thuân's life, like the sun around which everything revolves. 'Through God, I am in contact with everything,' he states. 'Why should I complain or be restless? I place everything in his hands, without fear and without conditions.'

What remains, and what matters, is the present moment. 'I will not wait,' he tells himself after his arrest. 'I want to live the present moment by filling it with love.' So, in prison, he made himself a tiny notebook out of sheets of police paper as a personal vademecum, in which he gradually wrote down more than 300 words from Scripture that he could remember, as an aid to living concretely from the Word of God. And, as is well known, he celebrated Holy Mass with three drops of wine and one drop of water in the palm of his hand.

At each of these celebrations, he says, I was able to spread my arms, as if I were nailed to the cross with Jesus; I was able to drink the bitter cup with him. Every day, as I spoke the words of consecration, I reaffirmed with all my heart and soul a new covenant, an eternal covenant between Jesus and me, through his blood mingled with mine. These were the most beautiful Masses of my life!

‘Living each moment with intensity,’ Van Thuân asserts, ‘is the secret to living well even the moment that will be your last.’ Hence his maxim:

Every moment of our life should be

the first moment,

the last moment,

the only moment .

Living in a radical decision for God, beyond all works; and living in the present moment, nourished by God's word and by Jesus in the Eucharist: this gives Van Thuân ever greater inner freedom and becomes for him a source of invincible hope, the terrain on which true hope can flourish.

Personal reflection:

What are my hopes?

Have I ever experienced or witnessed

how hope can arise even in hopeless situations?

On what occasion?

2.2. Hope as a path to all without limits

‘To love God is to love the world,’ writes Van Thuân in the book *Paths of Hope*, noting: “For all her passion for God, Mary was deeply concerned about the world. To hope in God is to hope for the salvation of the world.” In this statement, we encounter both Van Thuân's deep spirituality and his openness to the world. He emphatically warns against limiting Christianity to the spiritual dimension and thus separating it from everyday life. Rather, it is important to spark a revolution in one's own environment.

There is also a key experience in Van Thuân's life that illustrates this. It dates back to the first weeks of his imprisonment:

During my trip to northern Vietnam, I was chained three times to a non-Catholic, a member of parliament who was known as a Buddhist fundamentalist. The closeness of our shared fate touched his heart. (...)

On the ship and later in the re-education camp, I had the opportunity to engage in dialogue with a wide variety of people: ministers, parliamentarians, high-ranking military and civil authorities, influential religious representatives (...).

In the darkness of faith, in service, in humiliation, the light of hope changed my perspective: by now, this ship, this prison, was my most beautiful cathedral, and these prisoners, without exception, were the people of God entrusted to my pastoral care.

Hope, true hope, grows out of this boundless openness. For Van Thuân, his guards were a touchstone for this. It was difficult to build a relationship with them.

At first, the guards hardly exchanged a word with me. They only answered with 'yes' or 'no'. (...) One night, a thought came to me: François, you are still very rich, you have the love of Christ in your heart; love them as Jesus loved you." The next day, I began to love them even more, to love Jesus in them, with a smile and kind words. I began to tell them stories about my travels abroad (...). This aroused their curiosity and prompted them to ask me lots of questions. Little by little, we became friends.

In this way, Van Thuân won over his guards, so much so that they allowed him to make a pectoral cross with his own hands, which he wore as a bishop's cross throughout his life and which is kept here in the house in the meeting place dedicated to him.

In that abyss of suffering - Van Thuân affirms with regard to those years - (...) I never stopped loving everyone, I never excluded anyone from my heart. (...) I must remain faithful to the example of my martyred ancestors and to what I learned from my mother as a child.

According to Van Thuân, hope as a path to all without borders must not remain a pipe dream, but must become concrete. He comments on this in *Prayers of Hope*:

In the Middle Ages, knights dedicated their entire lives to preserving honour, protecting widows and orphans, and defending their fatherland. They recruited troops for expeditions to distant lands to liberate the tomb of Christ.

In our time, knights fight against injustice and oppression, against racial discrimination and dictatorship. They fight against epidemics and famines, misery, illiteracy and unemployment. In their peaceful efforts, they are prepared to make any sacrifice to establish a new economic system and create lasting harmony between peoples. They devote themselves to science in the service of humanity. But the most important mission of the knights of our time is to liberate Christ's tomb in people's souls. They are knights of love who do not hesitate to go wherever there are people who need their help: to marginalised groups and the

sick, to those who hunger for justice and those who thirst for tenderness. This kind of knight is much rarer.

Van Thuân was such a knight, and that is why he was a witness to hope.

2.3. Hope as a transformation of everyday life

Cardinal Van Thuân was a cheerful person with a great sense of humour. This is not only part of his motto: *Gaudium et spes* - joy and hope, but also inseparable from his understanding of hope. It bound him to the crucified Christ and made him ready for anything. Personally, he led an extremely simple lifestyle in terms of housing and clothing, and knew how to accept the circumstances of his life and the people around him with their limitations. But then he repeatedly experienced surprises that transformed everyday life.

The communists, he said during the last retreat he gave in February 2002, make police officers learn Latin so that they can check the documents and telegrams of the Holy See. One day, a prison guard who was studying Latin asked me to teach him a Latin song. I asked him which one, and he replied: Veni Creator. So I wrote down all seven verses of this hymn for him, not realising that he would memorise them. A few days later, I heard him singing the hymn as he walked down the wooden stairs to do gymnastics [in the courtyard], and then again while he was washing himself, and finally as he returned to his room, every morning. At first it seemed a little absurd to me that a communist would sing this hymn, but gradually I realised that when an archbishop can no longer pray and suffers greatly as a result, the Holy Spirit sends a communist policeman to sing and pray! Every morning he woke me up and let me join in his singing.

Similarly surprising is how, during solitary confinement in Hanoi, a double page of the Vatican daily newspaper *Osservatore Romano* came into his possession. It had been confiscated at the post office and was used as wrapping paper for a small fish that was brought to Van Thuân. He recounts: 'Quietly, without attracting attention, I thoroughly washed those two pages to remove the fish smell, let them dry in the sun, and then treasured them like a relic.'

Thanks to his good relations with his guards, Van Thuân was also able to ordain students from various dioceses as priests at night while under house arrest near Hanoi. Since he was already in prison, unlike other bishops, he had nothing to lose.

He even received a letter from Chiara Lubich, although only his mother was actually allowed to send him letters. 'That was a great joy and a source of support, because I felt connected to all of you, even though I was isolated and far away.'

What can we conclude from this? Hope does not allow us to stop at the bare facts. It counts on God and his possibilities, and thus transforms everyday life and opens up undreamt-of perspectives. Under the title 'Surprises,' Van Thuân writes about this in *Prayers of Hope*:

Until now, I had not even suspected that the powerful would be humbled and the humble exalted; that God himself will be done what is done to the least among men; that sorrow will be turned into joy and death into life; that those who sow in tears will reap in joy; that true happiness will be given to the poor in spirit, to those who suffer and weep, to those who are persecuted for the sake of justice. (...) How many surprises we will experience! The values of the world will be turned completely upside down.

In conclusion

In this hour, we have been on the path of hope together with Cardinal Van Thuân. Thank you for joining us! However, the path of hope does not end here. It can and should continue in the lives of each one of us. Let us take with us a word from him that reminds us of our mission as Christians in the world. It comes from the book *Paths of Hope*:

Christians are light in the darkness, they give depth to an insignificant life and are hope for a humanity that has lost its hope .

Discuss with your neighbour:

What do Van Thuân's paths of hope mean to me?

What food for thought have they given me?

And what inspiration for my life?