

Transformed by Hope

“I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed in us...For in this hope we were saved.”

-When I hear these words from St .Paul, I am led to reflect on the life a particularly special person from my country in the 1990s who embodied this hope: Cardinal Nguyen Van Thuan

-What is remarkable is that he endured the most gruelling tortures while he was imprisoned by the Communist government who imprisoned him for 13 years 9 of which were in solitary confinement.

Yet Cardinal Nguyen Van Thuan emerged from this trial through the power of hope and he is a marvelous example about how hope 1) transforms suffering 2) transforms others

Hope Transforms Suffering

-They would feed him a lot of water and food in the morning but instead of letting him out in the evening to go to the washroom they would leave him alone to force him to relieve himself in his cell so that they could humiliate him later. This would force him to not eat the food and drink that they provided him on the next days because he feared that they would use the same tactic against him.

-Eventually, he became very distressed also because he could not be with his people in his diocese and because he was in the prime of his life for doing ministry as a bishop and all the other duties he wanted to do for God.

-One day he heard the words “There is God’s work and then there is God” in which he realized that it had been God all along who was working through Thuan as his instrument. He came to the insight that Jesus accomplished the most important work in the world by becoming helpless and hanging on the cross. Although he could not do his normal pastoral work, loving God was the most important work he could do now through his suffering as he offered it to Jesus and Mary as tokens of love.

-What was once a filthy hole became transformed through his hope in God’s love and in this hope he was saved.

- I accept my cross and I plant it, with my own two hands, in my heart. If you were to permit me to choose, I would change nothing, because you are with me! I am no longer afraid, I have understood. I am following you in your passion and in your resurrection. (*Five Loaves and Two Fish, 48*)

Hope Transforms Others

Despite the cruel conditions that Cardinal Nguyen Van Thuan was subjected to, he still had much love for those officers and guards who persecuted him.

-He had a difficult time praying even the Hail Mary and Our Father due to the mental fatigue he experienced, but one day the officer asked him to teach him a Latin song. He sang him some samples of some Latin songs and the officer chose “Veni Creator Spiritus” “Come Holy Spirit”.

Imagine a Vietnamese Communist Officer singing the Latin hymn Veni Creator Spiritus in the middle of a communist prison everyday at 7 in the morning! God was using this officer to help the Cardinal pray because only the officers could sing at the prisons.

-Initially, he was trying to speak to his guards while on solitary confinement but they would only answer yes or no. He became very discouraged in trying to communicate these people because they did not make any effort. But eventually he told them stories of his travels abroad to Japan and the Phillipines and over time he became friends with his prison guards.

-At first they had guards who were guarding him rotating on a two week basis so that he could not convert them, but then they realized that he was converting all of the guards so they just left him with the same guards eventually.

It was very hard for my guards to understand when I spoke about loving our enemies, reconciliation and forgiveness.

"Do you really love us?"

"Yes, I really love you."

"Even when we cause you pain? When you suffer because you're in prison without trial?"

"Look at all the years we've spent together. Of course, I love you!" "And when you get out, will you tell your people to find us and beat us and hurt our families?"

"I'll continue to love you even if you wish to kill me" "But why?"

"Because Jesus taught us to love always; if we don't, we are no longer worthy to be called Christians."

Be worthy of the calling of a Christian. Let hope save you in your suffering and let it transform those around you, "For in this hope, we are saved."