

Holy Thursday 2004

St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic Church, Camas, WA

April 8, 2004

Some of you, I hope, have heard the story of Bishop Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan, who was arrested in 1975 by the communists in Vietnam. His crime was being the head of the Catholics in the city of Saigon. He was subject to particularly cruel treatment by his jailers and spent most of his 13 years in solitary confinement so as to limit the possibility of his contaminating the other prisoners with his subversive beliefs about Christ.

When he was first arrested he was taken with such suddenness that he had no opportunity to gather any of his things, and in his first days in prison one question dominated his mind, would he be able to say Mass. This also was the question that the other Catholic prisoners most often asked him, would he be able to give them the Eucharist. Soon after his imprisonment he was given permission to write a letter to his people in order to ask only for the most necessary things: clothes, toothpaste, medicines. In the letter he requested a little wine as medicine for his stomachaches. They also sent some hosts hidden in a flashlight. Each night, with a few of the faithful gathered close by he would place three drops of wine and a drop of water in the palm of his hand, the host in the other. And reciting the canon from memory, he was able to give the Body and Blood of Christ to the faithful, so that they were not alone or abandoned in their trials. For Bishop Van Thuan, he writes that the opportunity to say Mass, was his, "opportunity to extend my hands and nail myself to the cross with Jesus, to drink with him the bitter chalice. "Concluding he says, "those were the most beautiful Masses of my life. "

If he had been caught, and there were many close calls, if he had been caught the consequences would have been immediate and severe, but it gave the bishop the greatest joy to run that risk —simply because that was his life —he was a priest and God had created him so that he might make His Son present in that prison camp, to make Our Eucharistic Lord the companion of those who suffered there.

The martyrology of the twentieth century is filled with many such accounts of clandestine celebrations of the Mass in concentration camps, of priests who risked their lives to make Christ present in the most awful conditions. Christ makes himself present through his priests and through the priest, Christ communicates his salvation to the world. A greater calling could not be imagined.

This, obviously, has nothing to do with the priest's own worthiness. Over the past few years we have been bombarded by the terrible revelations concerning certain priests and bishops. We have all been scandalized by the lives and defects of those very men who are called to be the successors of the apostles, and who continue the work of sanctifying the People of God in the world. Even if not so sensational many of us have experienced the very humanness and frailty of priests —whether their impatience or laziness or anger, I am subjected to it every day. We are reminded again and again that

God did not choose angels to be His priests. But paradoxically it is the very humanness and weakness of the priest which gets to the very heart of what being a priest is about.

If we look at the origin of the priesthood here in the Upper Room. We have, of course Judas, the one chosen by Christ who would betray Him. We have Peter, the head of the apostles, the rock on which the Church is founded who will deny he even knows Jesus, when questioned by a serving girl. The rest of the disciples, even at this culminating moment of following Jesus are fighting over who is the greatest amongst them. And shortly, with the exception of St. John, they will all abandon the Master. Clearly He didn't choose angels, but rather deliberately chose those twelve men.

That is what is so telling about this event of the Washing of the Feet. They need to be purified by Christ Himself and made clean, made capable of the task which He entrusts to them. It is obvious that Christ has called them not because of their merits, virtues, or personal strength, rather he has called them because of their weakness, their failings, and their humanity, he will wash them clean and it is only by this cleansing gift that gives to them will they be able to carry out their mission. Their shortcomings and imperfections are there to remind them daily of who it is that is working through them. Any successes they have can only be credited to the grace of God working through them.

St. Paul sums up his priestly ministry very beautifully when he says, "we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us." When he wrote this he was probably thinking of Gideon, one of the judges of old, whom God called to save his people from the invading Midianites. Gideon gathered together his soldiers and had them place their torches in earthen jars, and then enter the enemy camp undetected, when the trumpet sounded the jars were to be smashed so that the light from the torches could blaze forth and send the enemy into retreat. The image of this imperfect earthen jar, with its roughness and irregularities is a good image for the priest. It is essential that they be earthen vessels so that they too can be broken and only then can the light of Christ shine out. Thus St. Paul can say "when I am weak, then I am strong."

I remember a talk that was given at a retreat in the seminary, the priest was telling us about his experience in a parish in Ireland. He said that when the people came to the parish for something serious, something very personal, or for a priest to whom they could make a long overdue confession, they would always ask for the older priest who was a recovering alcoholic because they knew that he was intimately familiar with human weakness and would bring a certain understanding that might be missing in a priest who has filled with all the human virtues. I don't think the retreat master was recommending that we try our hand at alcoholism. But was pointing out that essential aspect of the Christian priesthood: because he is an earthen vessel Christ can work most powerfully through him.

This culminates in the moment when he consecrates the bread and wine —making them into Christ's own Body and Blood. At that moment Our Lord speaks on a couple of different levels. On one level Christ speaks the words of consecration through the priest:

This is My Body, This is My Blood. 'But as well, Christ those words speaks to the priest, This is My Body, This is My Blood. 'The priest is no longer his own, his life must be configured entirely to Jesus Christ —everything about his life is to be a vehicle to make Christ visible and present in each and every situation and circumstance in the world.

This is what we see in the life of Cardinal Archbishop Van Thuan, he made Christ present. By his kindness and charity towards his captors, by his weakness and vulnerability, but most especially by offering Christ s'own Sacrifice in the Mass he gave to the people Jesus Christ who was their companion and Savior during their dark days of imprisonment.

What a great mystery is the gift of the priesthood, what a wonderful vocation — sometimes when I look at my own life, I am struck by what an incredible vocation God has given me, I am struck as well, knocked down in fact sometimes, by my own unworthiness, my own falling short in my response. But yet, I am assured by the fact that God did not call Angels, but fragile men, earthen vessels, to carry this great treasure.